An American Delusion:
Tiger Woods and the Tragedy of Scandal

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I was 14 years old when the hero of my youth became human. In staggering fashion, Tiger Woods the perfect man became a myth. It was for me a cultural coming of age. Tiger's fall from grace taught me as much about our society as it did about him.

Golf was a cornerstone of my childhood. I played countless rounds with my father and brother. Even in the cold and snow of Wisconsin winters, we had "champ of the night" competitions on a putting green we built in our basement. Naturally enough, my hero growing up was Tiger Woods. The first set of clubs I ever owned were Nike kids clubs[1], at a time when the "swoosh" was emblematic of that champion of champions, the likes of which golf had never seen. My father, my brother, and I watched in awe year after year as Tiger Woods broke every record that could be broken.

My father involved me in golf from a young age as much for the game's values as for its enjoyment. In golf, you keep your own score; you call penalties on yourself. It's a game of integrity and personal accountability. As Tiger's father told him, my father told me: the game of golf is much like life. He could not have known just how right he would be.

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Tiger Woods' meteoric rise started almost from birth. As his father Earl liked to remind reporters, Tiger could swing a golf club before he could walk.[2] At the age of two, he confidently marched onto the set of *The Mike Douglas Show* to match putts with Jimmy Stewart and Bob Hope.[3] He won 113 tournaments by the age of 11[4] [5] and would go on to win five Junior World Golf Championships, three consecutive U.S. Junior Amateur Championships, three consecutive U.S. Amateur Championships, and the NCAA Division I Individual Championship.[6] Soon after, he turned professional and, at the age of 21, won the 1997 Masters Championship—by 12 shots.[7] Winning by that margin is akin to winning the NBA finals by some 40 points per game.

Each year in professional golf there are four "majors", tournaments with special levels of prestige and fields comprised of all of the world's best players. The Masters tournament that Tiger won in 1997 is one such major and perhaps the most storied tournament in all of golf.

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[1] Those Nike clubs existed *because* of Tiger Woods: Nike did not even have a golf product line until company founder Phil Knight saw Tiger at a college tournament and decided to sign him no matter the cost (Starn, *The Passion of Tiger Woods*, 23, 25.).

[2] Polumbaum, J., and S. G. Wieting. Stories of Sport and the Moral Order: Unraveling the Cultural Construction of Tiger Woods. *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 1, no. 2 (1999): 68-118. doi:10.1177/152263799900100202, 93.

[3] Starn, Orin. *The Passion of Tiger Woods: An Anthropologist Reports on Golf, Race, and Celebrity Scandal*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

[4] Rubinstein, Lorne. Tiger's Private Struggles. Time. Accessed May 05, 2016. http://time.com/tiger/.

[5] Tiger digresses: "I peaked at 11, to be honest with you. I went 36 and 0 that year, never lost a tournament, all in California. And I probably had the cutest girlfriend in all of sixth grade. And I had straight As. No A-minuses. They were all perfect As. I peaked at 11. I've been trying to get back to that since." (Rubenstein, *Tiger's Private Struggles*.).

[6] About Tiger. TigerWoods.com. Accessed June 05, 2016. http://www.tigerwoods.com/about-tiger.

[7] *Ibid.*

Tiger won another major two-and-a-half years later, the 1999 PGA Championship, and the following year went on an unprecedented and still unmatched run that is easily one of the greatest stretches in sports history.[8] He won four straight majors, the first by *15 shots* and the second by 8 shots. By the age of 25, Tiger Woods had become a living legend in the world of golf, and he was just getting started.

Although his talent and victories launched him into the public spotlight, Tiger's heroic stature at the peak of his powers was a result of much more than his golfing accomplishments. He was Stanford-educated[9], well spoken, and beloved by the press. With a charming demeanor and an endearing ear-to-ear grin, he was a star of television broadcasts. As the first billionaire athlete in history[10] [11], he was a symbol of astonishing achievement. As the founder of an organization dedicated to aiding underserved youth (the Tiger Woods Foundation, which he started at age 21[12]), he was a symbol of magnanimity in victory. As he matured, Tiger transformed himself from a lanky kid into an athlete with the physique of a Marine[13]. He married a beautiful woman and soon had two young children, whom he doted on. Just as his relationship with his parents had been "upheld as an exemplar of family values"[14], his young family was viewed as an example of an American family ideal.

More subtly than other factors, but perhaps more deeply than any, Tiger Woods mixed-race identity made him "a unifying national symbol"[15] and "the perfect hero for a post-racial, post-civil-rights America"[16]. Just after his 1997 Masters victory—his first professional victory and one of the most dramatic in the history of golf—Tiger revealed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that he considered himself "Cablinasian", a term of his creation that combined Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian.[17] Although this term drew criticism from some, who felt that Tiger was not suitably acknowledging his African-American heritage (though he is only one-quarter Black[18]), for others it made him a figure representative of the American melting pot. Tiger is the son of a Black father and a Thai mother[19] [20], and he married a white, Swedish-American woman[21]. Sociologists Judy Polumbaum and Stephen Wieting note that, in the frame of many popular ac-

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[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Badenhausen, Kurt. Sports' First Billion-Dollar Man. Forbes. September 29, 2009. http://www.forbes.com/2009/09/29/tiger-woods-billion-business-sports-tiger.html.

[11] According to *Forbes*' calculations, he achieved this in September 2009, just three months before the scandal broke (Badenhausen, Sports' First Billion-Dollar Man.).

[12] Kanani, Rahim. Tiger Woods on Philanthropy. Forbes. June 22, 2014. http://www.forbes.com/sites/rahimkanani/2014/06/22/tiger-woods-on-philanthropy/#4c41be5c1bfe.

[13] The military reference is deliberate: Tiger would become obsessed with the military in the years leading up to the scandal (Thompson, The Secret History of Tiger Woods.).

[14] Polumbaum and Wieting, Stories of Sport and the Moral Order, 98.

[15] *Ibid.*, 96.

[16] Starn, *The Passion of Tiger Woods*, 73.

[17] *Ibid.*, 70.

[18] Cashmore, E. Tiger Woods and the New Racial Order. *Current Sociology* 56, no. 4 (2008): 621-34. doi:10.1177/0011392108090945, 624.

[19] Starn, *The Passion of Tiger Woods*, 26.

[20] Tiger's mother is truly half-Thai and half-Chinese, though she is often referred to as simply Thai (Starn, *the Passion of Tiger Woods*, 26).

[21] *Ibid.*, 54.

counts, "To believe in Woods [was] to believe in the American multicultural experiment."[22] If this seems like an untenable claim, consider that a bill proposing a "multiracial" classification for the 2000 census was called the "Tiger Woods census bill".[23]

Tiger was also a perfect hero in a political sense because he was apparently uninterested in activism of almost any kind.[24] When racial issues came to the fore, he summarily dismissed them and, like the legendary basketball star Michael Jordan, almost exclusively avoided politically charged topics.[25] Religiously, he practices what one might call mild Buddhism[26], a faith that on the whole has a positive and noncontroversial reputation in the United States[27]. Tiger was not interested in making race, religion, or anything except winning an issue, which meant that he could be both a champion to those passionate about racial inequity and a politically convenient savior to the other side.

The historical import of Tiger's racial identity did much to catalyze his rise to fame, despite the fact that he did not emphasize it in any way. Although little racial commentary resulted from Tiger's interracial marriage, his parents' union in 1969 occurred just two years after the Supreme Court first provided legal assurance for interracial marriage[28]. It is also little known that discrimination on golf courses was one of the first targets of the early civil rights movement.[29] A group called the Greensboro Six, for example, played a round of golf against club rules in much the way of the lunch-counter sit-ins five years later and with the same spirit as Martin Luther King Jr.'s march to Selma 10 years later.[30] In harmony with this history, Tiger won his dramatic 1997 Masters victory at Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Georgia, an institution with an ignominious record of discrimination in a formerly Confederate state; it was 1990 when Augusta National finally admitted its first Black member. When Tiger destroyed the competition in his 1997 victory, race seemed basically irrelevant. With his disinterested air and complex ethnic complexion, Tiger Woods had become the cultural savior of a sport with an embarrassingly homogeneous lineage of wealthy white men.

In short, Tiger Woods came to represent a kind of American Dream, not just the classic rise from modest means to fabulous wealth, but also the dream of the civil rights movement: an America where race does not matter. Tiger's father hoped his son would "transcend"[31] the game of golf, and it seemed that he certainly had. Tiger bought an enormous mansion in an exclusive gated community in Isleworth, Florida, where the state income tax is zero.[32] It was as if the dream really had come true, and Tiger's performance validated it all the while.

More than all of the factors mentioned above, what made Tiger Woods seem so superhuman was his astonishing performance under pressure. When it mattered most, he never

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[22] Polumbaum and Wieting, Stories of Sport and the Moral Order, 97.

[23] *Ibid.*, 97.

[24] *Ibid.*, 101.

[25] Starn, *The Passion of Tiger Woods*, 24-25.

[26] *Ibid.*, 60.

[27] Harrison, Paul. Can Lotuses Bloom in a Sea of Flames? Buddhism and Conflict in the Modern Period. Lecture, RELIGST 29 (Religion: Violence and Nonviolence): Lecture 8, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, February 23, 2016.

[28] Polumbaum and Wieting, Stories of Sport and the Moral Order, 109.

[29] Starn, *The Passion of Tiger Woods*, 74.

[30] *Ibid.*, 75.

[31] Polumbaum and Wieting, Stories of Sport and the Moral Order, 95.

[32] *Ibid.*, 108.

missed. While others would crumble and choke, Tiger would perform that much better and claim victory every single time. Never was this more apparent than in the final round of the 2008 U.S. Open, the climax of Tiger's professional career. The U.S. Open (one of the four majors in professional golf) is the toughest test in golf. It is designed to push even the world's best to their limits. Despite having a torn anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and stress fractures in his left leg, Tiger entered the tournament determined to win.[33] After hobbling through much of the final round, he came to the final hole needing a birdie to tie and go into a playoff against Rocco Mediate. As only Tiger can, he drained his birdie putt with a triumphant fist pump and roar and won the playoff the next day.[34] [35] By that point, at the age of 32, he had won 14 major championships, 15 World Golf Championships[36], and 65 total PGA Tour tournaments.[37] Tiger Woods was untouchable. No one would have guessed that, 18 months later, his life would be in shambles.

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At 2 A.M. on Thanksgiving night, 2009, Tiger Woods drove out of his driveway and crashed his car into a tree only yards away.[38] His wife Elin was not far behind, brandishing a golf club[39] that she used to smash the passenger-side window so that she could drag her unconscious husband from the car.[40] It was a minor crash—Tiger spent a few hours in a hospital and suffered only very minor injuries[41]—but when the story appeared on CNN[42] the next day, people were confused. *What happened?*

It is a question that still haunts millions of once-adoring Tiger Woods fans (and surely the man himself).[43] In the weeks following the bizarre car accident, the world learned that Tiger Woods was an adulterer—at least a dozen times over.[44] He had been having affairs for several years, and his marriage would soon crumble.[45] The fallout was dramatic. Porn star Joslyn James posted hundreds of "sexts" she had received from Tiger online; one woman claimed to have had sex with Tiger on the night his father passed away.[46] The *New York Post* featured the scandal on its front cover for 20 consecutive days.[47] Orin Starn, author of a book about the scandal called *The*

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[33] Starn, *The Passion of Tiger Woods*, 36.

[34] United States Golf Association (USGA). 2008 U.S. Open: Tiger Forces Playoff vs. Rocco. YouTube. May 27, 2014. Accessed June 05, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFfCpvT_MV8.

[35] See www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFfCpvT_MV8.

[36] These are tournaments second only to majors in importance and difficulty.

[37] About Tiger, TigerWoods.com.

[38] Starn, *The Passion of Tiger Woods*, 39.

[39] Many have speculated that she was chasing Tiger out of the house, enraged at having found out about his affairs.

[40] *Ibid.*, 39.

[41] *Ibid.*, 39.

[42] *Ibid.*, 43.

[43] See Shipnuck, Alan. What Happened to Tiger Woods? It Remains the Most Vexing Question in Sports. *GOLF*. GOLF Magazine, 29 Mar. 2016. Web. 2 May 2016.

[44] *Ibid.*, 40.

[45] *Ibid.*, 61.

[46] *Ibid.*, 40.

[47] Shipnuck, Alan. What Happened to Tiger Woods? It Remains the Most Vexing Question in Sports. *GOLF*. GOLF Magazine, 29 Mar. 2016. Web. 2 May 2016.

Passion of Tiger Woods, describes how even "high-brow" news organizations reported heavily on the story.[48] Although they "maintained a certain ironic, soberly sociological distance"[49], such a reporting style allowed them "to have their cake and eat it too—they could sell copies to those interested in Tigergate's sordid details, yet simultaneously position themselves as more thoughtful and less bottom-feeding than the tabloid press."[50] Tiger soon lost many of his major sponsorships[51] and entered therapy for sex addiction[52]. He took an indefinite leave of absence from professional golf and soon suffered various injuries that severely inhibited his career—he still has not won another major tournament.[53] His wife divorced and sued him, the press crucified him, and a generation of dreamers suffered a rude awakening: Tiger Woods the perfect man was a myth.

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No one has yet made a movie about the Tiger Woods scandal, but consider for a moment: what would such a movie look like? How would the story play out on screen?

It would almost certainly be a classical tragedy, with Tiger's rise to fame, tragic flaw, and calamitous fall on full display. We would know ahead of time that Tiger would lose his way, not only because most of us know about the story from news coverage but also because it would be presented that way. The genre of tragedy is in many ways marked by its use of dramatic irony, where the audience knows something the character does not (generally their tragic flaw). This makes the fall from grace poignantly inevitable, which it makes it devastating to watch but also strangely beautiful. More importantly, it allows for catharsis: growth and learning through witnessing the fall. It is only through such a tragic presentation that we can make sense of Tiger's collapse.

Scandal then seems crucially distinct from tragedy in that it has inverted dramatic irony: the character knows something we the audience do not. For this reason, the fall from grace is like a slap in the face, a calamity without warning. There is no opportunity for catharsis, except in retrospect when we inevitably cast the story as a tragedy to interpret it. The fall from grace is all the more catastrophic for how high the character flies and how suddenly he plummets.

But this distinction between tragedy and scandal rests on an implicit assumption of who is on stage. We tend to assume without second thought that the character, Tiger Woods, is on stage and that we are only spectators. Our social institutions reinforce this assumption. Sports, as prime examples, are in the very business of constructing stages on which champions can be crowned and tragedies can play out. Sports derive value from relationships between spectator and spectacle. Even a cursory glance at Tiger's victorious fist pump on the final hole of the 2008 U.S. Open leaves little doubt that he is on the grandest of stages, a meticulously manicured golf green surrounded by thousands of adoring fans. But Tiger Woods is not the only one performing: we the spectators—and American culture itself—are on a stage of our own.

Scandal and tragedy are thus not truly different but rather two versions of the same dramatic form: the tragedy of scandal is one where the supposed audience is on stage. In the Tiger

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[48] Starn, *The Passion of Tiger Woods*, 41.

[49] *Ibid.*, 41.

[50] *Ibid.*, 42.

[51] *Ibid.*, 43.

[52] *Ibid.*, 44.

[53] Shipnuck, What Happened to Tiger Woods?

Woods scandal, there are two interwoven tragedies: one of a superstar athlete who lost his way and one of a culture that holds famous people to impossible standards. Our tragic flaw, as a culture, was glorifying Tiger as the perfect man and then brutally criticizing him for not living up to a standard that no human being could possibly meet. Tiger's scandal says as much about America as it does about him. Our fall from grace revealed a brutal truth: Tiger's tragedy is our own.

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America has always been a frontier. Whether through a radical new form of government, westward expansion into uncharted territories, or cultivation of the technological cutting edge, America has consistently outstretched the old in pursuit of the new. With this ambition toward the future comes constant tension—old orders do not often die quietly. America itself was born in war. It warred with itself to eradicate slavery. It is now caught in limbo between being an entrenched incumbent and a nimble innovator in an increasingly dynamic world order.

There is a tendency to view the Founding Fathers as emblematic of America today. This is partly accurate—the Founding Fathers did share many of the values we uphold today—but it betrays a presentist bias that ignores the many stark differences between America then and now. When we honor people with integrity, we cite George Washington yet fail to realize that his notion of integrity was quite different than our own. When we applaud liberty and equality, we cite Thomas Jefferson yet forget that the Declaration of Independence granted rights only to white men, not all people.

The Founding Fathers were certainly not like their counterparts in European aristocracies. As Pulitzer Prize winning historian Gordon Wood describes in his book *Revolutionary Characters*, "they constituted a peculiar sort of elite, a self-created aristocracy largely based on merit and talent that was unlike the hereditary nobility that ruled eighteenth-century English society."[54] Although many reached the highest standing in their colonial societies, their fortunes and social stature would have made them only middling in European social and economic hierarchies.[55] [56] They had much more modest backgrounds than European elites and achieved success through effort more than inheritance. The vast majority of the Founding Fathers were legitimately self-made men: only eight of the 99 signers of either the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution had fathers who attended college.[57][58] Perhaps most significantly, they believed the people to be the source of their authority[59], indeed a revolutionary notion.

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[54] Wood, Gordon S. *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different*. N.p.: Penguin, 2006. Print, 11.

[55] Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 12.

[56] As Wood details: "Eighteenth-century Britain remained under the authority of about four hundred noble families whose fabulous scale of landed wealth, political influence, and aristocratic grandeur was unmatched by anyone in North America…. By English standards, American aristocrats like Washington and Jefferson, even with hundreds of slaves, remained minor gentry at best. Moreover, by the English measure of status, lawyers like Adams and Hamilton were even less distinguished, gentlemen no doubt but nothing like the English nobility" (Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 12.).

[57] *Ibid.*, 24.

[58] More precisely, only eight are *known* to have had fathers who attended college (Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 24). However, "there exists a remarkable amount of historical evidence" about the Founding Fathers, so this is a reasonable statistic to cite (Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 9.).

[59] *Ibid.*, 11.

This much is commonplace among those inculcated in modern America's version of its own history: America was founded by men who were a far cry from European aristocrats and monarchs. But the popular view of the Founding Fathers is too simplistic. As Wood notes, "The revolutionary leaders were not modern men."[60] They valued merit over hereditary status, but they were "certainly not democrats in any modern manner."[61] They sincerely saw themselves as superior to common people and believed they had an obligation to hold public office because of their talents and backgrounds.[62] They worked to distance themselves from European aristocrats but still aimed to be what Jefferson called natural aristocrats, who derived their status from "enlightened values and benevolent behavior."[63] They considered themselves members of a new elite and were not embarrassed to say so in public.[64]

The Founding Fathers also had a crucially different conception of character than our culture does today. They felt it was not insincere but rather virtuous to cultivate public personas that conformed to societal ideals and differed from their private identities. Alexander Hamilton felt that a gentleman's suitability for public office should in no way depend on his private life.[65] Thomas Jefferson and Martha Washington went so far as to physically destroy their correspondences with their spouses.[66] [67] Benjamin Franklin created a whole cast of roles that he acted out through pseudonyms[68] and daily behavior, but this was not at odds with what was considered respectable (and even admirable) behavior at the time.[69] Although the modern meaning of character is much closer to the innate qualities, virtues, and shortcomings of an individual, another definition—that of a character on stage—held much more weight for the Founding Fathers. As Wood describes, "They talked obsessively about earning a character…. the outer life, the public person trying to show the world that he was living up to the values and duties that the best of the culture imposed on him."[70] Washington was famous for his obsession with his reputation and

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[60] *Ibid*., 16-17.

[61] *Ibid*., 11.

[62] *Ibid*., 11, 17.

[63] *Ibid*., 25.

[64] It is difficult to imagine a modern American politician doing the same. Consider some of the opening lines from the 1992 *New York Times* article "Bush Encounters Supermarket, Amazed": "This career politician, who has lived the cloistered life of a top Washington bureaucrat for decades, is having trouble presenting himself to the electorate as a man in touch with middle-class life. Today, for instance, he emerged from 11 years in Washington's choicest executive mansions to confront the modern supermarket" (Rosenthal, Bush Encounters Supermarket, Amazed.).

[65] *Ibid*., 23.

[66] *Ibid*., 23.

[67] "[T]hey believed that such letters were exclusively private and had no role to play in telling the world the nature of their public characters" (Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 23).

[68] Franklin wrote 90 pieces under 42 different names while in London (Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 72). "When Franklin used a pseudonym, he often created an entire persona for the 'writer'. Sometimes he wrote as a woman, other times as a man, but always with a specific point of view…. Silence Dogood, Harry Meanwell, Alice Addertongue, Richard Saunders, and Timothy Turnstone were a few of the many pseudonyms Franklin used throughout his career" (Wit and Wisdom.). Even when he didn't use a pseudonym, Franklin seemed to be acting: "His *Autobiography* resembles a work of fiction in which we cannot be sure that the leading character is the same as the author" (Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 71.).

[69] *Ibid*., 23.

[70] *Ibid*., 22-23.

meticulously crafted public appearances.[71] John Adams saw himself and his contemporaries as literal characters on a stage (and was disappointed that, in his own opinion, he was not one of the stars).[72] Indeed, as Wood well notes, "these revolutionary leaders inevitably became characters, self-fashioned performers in the theater of life."[73]

American society today could not be more different. In the modern age, it is considered deeply insincere and even deceptive to act out a persona different than one's "true" self. Politicians are heavily criticized if they seem fake or overly scripted in their public appearances. The private lives of our public figures are more or less fair game for an ever more voracious press. Mark Zuckerberg—as much a modern "natural aristocrat" as one can imagine—promotes a radically different view than the natural aristocrats of America's founding: "You have one identity…. Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity."[74]

Yet it is difficult to believe that anyone, even Zuckerberg himself, truly believes this.[75] If his statement were true, there would be few among us who do not lack integrity. It is human nature to perform one's identity and act differently in different situations. Zuckerberg's statement reflects not so much a modern reality as a modern attempt to relieve cultural tensions that have existed in America since its founding. America has always struggled to reconcile reality with ideals. The Founding Fathers could never quite form the group of disinterested gentlemen they felt should rightly govern. They tried with moderate success to be both among the people and apart from them but ironically undermined their attempts with their own Revolution. As Wood argues in *Revolutionary Characters*, the egalitarianism they spawned in founding America undercut their vision of a civic elite:

> In the early nineteenth century the voices of ordinary people, at least ordinary white people, began to be heard as never before in history, and they soon overwhelmed the high-minded desires and aims of the revolutionary leaders who had brought them into being. The founders had succeeded only too well in promoting democracy and equality among ordinary people; indeed, they succeeded in preventing any duplication of themselves.[76]

The Founding Fathers do not embody America in the 21st century but rather America in a much deeper sense. As the instigators and mediators of their historic Revolution, they occupied an awkward middle ground between European aristocracy and New World meritocracy. In scholarly memory, they exist as conflicted transitions between an old order and a brave new world. Through their efforts, America was born as nation caught between intellectual ideals and chaotic reality. It has desperately tried to hold on to both ever since.

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[71] "In his public appearances he rode in a elaborately ornamented coach drawn by four and sometimes six horses, attended with four servants in livery, followed by his official family in other coaches" (Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 52.).

[72] *Ibid*., 24.

[73] *Ibid*., 23.

[74] Dijck, J. Van. 'You Have One Identity': Performing the Self on Facebook and LinkedIn. *Media, Culture & Society* 35, no. 2 (2013): 199-215. doi:10.1177/0163443712468605,1.

[75] Zuckerberg, after all, is economically motivated to promote such a belief to enhance the value of Facebook, which depends on the accuracy of its user data for effective advertising (the source of the vast majority of its revenue).

[76] Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 25.

The resulting tension between idealism and reality has been on full display with the decline of the hero and rise of the modern celebrity. Beginning in the 1970s, as historian William Graebner notes, people across a wide variety of disciplines "debated, and usually lamented, the decline of the hero."[77] Graebner argues that "the proliferation of celebrity status"[78] was one of many factors[79] that "made heroism of the traditional variety improbable."[80] Although this is a reasonable claim, since modern celebrity (with its questionable reputation and materialistic garb) is at odds with classical heroism, the relationship between the two is better understood as mutual. Heroism has become increasingly unrealistic, arguably due in large part to technology that has undermined privacy and corroded separation between public and private affairs (and thus between appearances and reality). Celebrity has taken heroism's place, catalyzed by its slow demise.

As with other old orders, heroism has not died quickly or quietly. As Graebner argues, it survived in part as a political tool for the Republican right, which attempted "to identify the decline of the heroic with the liberal values and movements of the 'sixties' and the cultural 'malaise' of the 1970s."[81] As heroism became increasingly at odds with modern culture, it tended to take the form of "the 'ordinary' hero—the ordinary, 'average' person who had done something extraordinary."[82] Indeed, this notion of the everyman hero was popular on among both liberals and conservatives, "especially among critics of the media-produced celebrity hero."[83] The changing narratives of heroism and the rise of modern celebrity thus evidence the ongoing cultural struggle to reconcile traditional values with a changing societal landscape. Human nature has certainly not changed: we have just as much need for aspirations and inspiration as before. The difference is that those must be derived from other sources: classical heroism can no longer exist.

Tiger Woods seemed to prove otherwise. He represented all that is good about America and was a *deus ex machina* for classical narratives of heroism that had become increasingly untenable in an age of transparency. He was a symbol of the American melting pot with an astonishing mix of talent and circumstance that launched him to heights few have ever reached. He convinced the world that anyone with enough merit, passion, and drive could attain fabulous success. Tiger Woods was a validation of the American Dream.

Tiger Woods is now emblematic of an American Delusion. We simultaneously want humans to be heroes and heroes to be human when it is impossible to have both. We built grand monuments in Washington D.C. to glorify the Founding Fathers, yet historians have what Gordon Wood calls a "century-long tradition of deflating [their] reputations" to humanize (if not dehumanize) them.[84] We expect our politicians to be exemplary individuals yet as relatable as our neighbors. We want our stars to be brilliant and out-of-reach yet down-to-Earth. Even in fiction,

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[77] Graebner, William. "The Man in the Water": The Politics of the American Hero, 1970-1985. *Historian* 75, no. 3 (2013): 517-43. doi:10.1111/hisn.12015, 518.

[78] Graebner, "The Man in the Water", 519.

[79] Graebner also cites "urban disorder, Johnson's credibility gap, Watergate, the feminist movement, and a widespread crisis of authority" (Graebner 519). To this I add technological change, which I detail briefly later in the paragraph.

[80] *Ibid*., 519.

[81] *Ibid*., 520-521.

[82] *Ibid*., 533.

[83] *Ibid*., 533.

[84] Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 6.

we try to have it both ways: the quintessential American hero—Superman—is also Clark Kent, an ordinary guy.

Modern celebrity epitomizes this contradictory cultural disposition, but neither celebrity nor the disposition is new. As sociologist John Carroll notes, the roots of celebrity can be traced back at least as far as ancient Greece (as with so much in modern Western society): "Greek gods and demi-gods have been reborn as 'stars' and 'celebrities', with their own divine attributes."[85] Indeed, there may be something fundamentally human about our obsession with the rises and falls of extraordinary individuals. Carroll describes how "the audience gets a triple pleasure from this show" through imagining idealized lives of glamour, experiencing the *Schadenfreude* of the fall, and feeling indignant and self-righteous about the fallen star's hubris.[86] It is thus not surprising that celebrity has taken the form it has. As cultural critic and scholar Reni Celeste describes,

> Many critics of tragedy in modernity insist that democracy itself rendered tragedy defunct. But the modern star is proof that a new kind of tragedy emerges in the popular. Social mobility is the source of authority in modern capitalistic democracy, where the ultimate value is the rise of the individual.[87]

Celeste's insight sheds light on Tiger Woods' especially lofty status: his star power and authority were in large part due to his historic social mobility, both in terms of achieving extreme economic success and breaking through entrenched and infamous racial barriers.

Yet the Tiger Woods scandal was in many ways so startlingly mundane. The indignant outcries surrounding it seem bizarre at best and hypocritical at worst. Orin Starn notes in his book about the scandal that surveys conducted around the same time indicate that "more than 60 percent of married men and 50 percent of married women [had] had at least one affair; 54 percent of newlyweds [would] divorce within fifteen years."[88] Marital problems were clearly commonplace among not only celebrities but everyday people as well, and yet the public and press lambasted Tiger Woods for his affairs. Despite his insightful analysis, Starn's own term—"Tigergate"[89]—epitomizes the overreaction to the scandal better than perhaps anything else. It is not only yet another overuse of the "-gate" suffix following Watergate; it is, in the fairest analysis, an absurd comparison between a series of affairs and a prolonged crisis of corruption and deception at the highest levels of American government. Clearly, Tiger made an enormous mistake and deserves severe criticism, but it is somewhat shocking that the libertine behavior of a professional golfer garnered so much attention.

Only by understanding the nature of tragedy and our culture's tragic flaw can we make sense of the vitriolic public reaction to the scandal. As Celeste describes, "Tragedy is a form that capitalizes on the beauty of falling things. The more gained in the rise, the more lost in the fall."[90] Tiger Woods had risen so high that his fall was a tantalizing possibility even his fans could not ignore. Celeste argues that this is the very nature of the spectator: "The fan is compelled by

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[85] Carroll, John. The Tragicomedy of Celebrity. *Society* 47, no. 6 (2010): 489-92. doi:10.1007/s12115-010-9366-7.

[86] *Ibid.*, 491.

[87] Celeste, Reni. Screen Idols: The Tragedy Of Falling Stars. *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 33, no. 1 (2005): 29-38. doi:10.3200/jpft.33.1.29-38.

[88] Starn, *The Passion of Tiger Woods*, 60.

[89] For an example of Starn using this term, see the quotation near the end of page 6.

[90] Celeste, Screen Idols, 35.

fascination to learn more or to uncover and expose the nudity of the star. Love of the star is a movement from glamour to defilement…. The living star is already a ruin, a tombstone. And ruins have always inspired dreams."[91] The Tiger Woods scandal was mundane in reality but spectacular in its recasting as an epic tragedy in the deafening echo chambers of the modern yellow press. The insatiable curiosity of millions of fans meant that even the slightest fissure would become a gaping chasm in Tiger's carefully constructed façade. It took little more than a minor car crash and a tabloid spread to take Tiger Woods from glorification to condemnation and from champion to cheat.

What ultimately made the scandal so devastating was its implication of American culture, which experienced a fall from grace all its own. We the adoring Tiger Woods fans, naïve in our innocence, watched in horror as our most cherished hero became human. It was a devastating challenge to our mythos of heroism. Celeste reveals the poignant truth: "The celebrity exists as a photograph or mirror in which the fan experiences his own tragedy…. The allure of the star is inseparable from his or her heroism and ruin."[92] And Tiger Woods' heroism and ruin was inseparable from our own.

Celebrities are porcelain mannequins of our construction. We paint and clothe them, wanting them to be both real and make believe. Like impetuous children, we throw them into the air just to pretend they can fly, marveling when for a moment they float in thin air as if by magic. When they inevitably fall to Earth and smash irreparably, we act self-righteously betrayed. We forget that their doom is our doing.

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The mythic figure of my upbringing has never recovered and probably never will. In most ways, I am grateful to know the truth, the ugly reality of Tiger Woods the human being. I would rather confront brutal reality than be charmed by a pleasant delusion.

But in moments of reflection, when my mind wanders back to the innocence of younger days, I remember being 10 years old and marching down the fairway with my Nike kids clubs, inspired not just by Tiger Woods the golfer but Tiger Woods the ideal. He inspired so much in me. He put bounce in my step and fire in my eyes as I marched ever further out into the world, striving to be a champion in all of my pursuits. When Tiger—that is who he was to me: *Tiger!*—came crashing down, the last hero of my youth was vanquished. At once, there was nothing but scandal in politics, indiscretion in sports, and fraud in business. There were no heroes; there were no ideals. Everything was human, and everything was flawed. Perhaps our culture's tragic flaw is unavoidable, but I cannot help but wonder: in destroying our delusions, are we murdering our dreams?

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[91] *Ibid.,* 31-32.

[92] *Ibid.*, 34, 29.

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