

Jack Dempsey: An American Hero in the 1920's

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From 1919 to 1927 William Harrison "Jack" Dempsey was Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World. Because of his tremendous popularity boxing became one of the major sports of the decade. Crowds totaling over 500,000 saw Dempsey's title bouts, while millions more listened breathlessly to those fights which were broadcasted over radio. And newspapers and magazines of every kind carried stories on Dempsey. It is not surprising, then, that he became a public hero.

It is Dempsey as hero that this paper examines. As psychologists, sociologists, and folklorists have demonstrated, "the hero may illustrate social interactions in its myriad forms . . . He may be utilized to typify the whole culture or perhaps some aspect of it. He may be thought of as an index to the national mind or spirit." If the above statement is true, then the career of Jack Dempsey should illustrate something of the temper or mood of the 1920's.

I studied Dempsey's life in the 1920's. What was found was that every one of his title bouts illustrated some social, political, or economic theme of the decade. For example, his fights with Jess Williard and Billy Miske saw Dempsey portrayed as a kind-hearted, if somewhat violent, hero. The motion picture industry was also quick to capitalize on this image of Dempsey. The fight with Georges Carpentier highlighted the war issue by focusing on Dempsey's war record. This bout was also important for showing the power of American nationalism, as was Dempsey's later fight with Luis Angel Firpo. Other matches underscored other issues: money, the economy, anti-intellectualism, racism — they all found their way into Dempsey's fights.

Dempsey's loss to Gene Tunney signified an end to the Golden Age of boxing. It also marked the symbolic death of one of the greatest heroes of the 1920's. Neither Babe Ruth nor Bobby Jones commanded the press space that Dempsey did. But the question remains: What did Dempsey mean to the 1920's? It has been shown that the career of Jack Dempsey encompassed more than just his fights. Each fight became symbolically something larger. Each became a platform from which to debate issues central to the 1920's. War issues, race questions, cultural schisms, and nationalistic impulses all found their way into Dempsey's fights. No newspaper or magazine was above using some aspect of Dempsey's career to symbolically demonstrate some facet of a social, political, or economic issue.

More importantly, Dempsey, as a hero, tells something about the temperament of the 1920's. Roderick Nash, in *The Nervous Generation: American Thought, 1917-1930*, wrote that "Ideas change with glacial slowness. A new attitude may appear and gain strength, but the older one does not automatically disappear." This concept is of paramount importance in understanding the influence of Dempsey. While the 1920's may have seen something of what Frederick Lewis Allen called "the revolution in manners and morals," the old virtues were not stifled. When the masses wanted a hero, they chose a tighter who had been characterized as a possessor of the traditional mores, and not a tighter who symbolized the "lost generation". Just as the public showed support for the timeless American virtues by making Gene Stratton-Porter the pre-eminent popular novelist of the 1920's, they voiced their acceptance of the old American ways by their adherence to the Dempsey myth.