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Evolution of a Hero

What do we consider a hero exactly? Is it the brawn and courageous firefighter and the everyday cop? Or rather the person read about it comics and see on the TV screen, someone with super-human strength, impeccable hearing, and lasers shooting through their eyes? Each description can be placed upon a hero in the modern day, but either way the concept of hero is a lengthy and tricky term to describe. A more interesting question would be how did it get to this every day conception? Better yet, what kind of evolution has the hero undergone? To detail the transition from caveman to batman would take far too long, but there are the initial legends from famous literary heroes. How does a hero such as Beowulf transition to a hero like Sir Gawain? From Old English to Medieval, these two characters will be explored for their similarities and differences to how they approach problems, how they are after they have accomplished their feat, and most of all, how they became that way.

To best under these characters and the text, it is also crucial to understand that time period they are coming from. First, Beowulf is a piece of literature to be considered in the literary period of Old English, also known as the era of Anglo-Saxons Old English is a Western Germanic language, developing from North Sea Germanic dialects from the fifth century (Ashliman). Because of this history, Beowulf is a vital outlook on Scandinavian culture. It makes many mythical references, as well as references to Anglo-Saxon characteristics with a Christian overlay.

 On the other hand, there is the historical background of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is to be considered in the Late Middle Ages, also known as the Late Medieval, nearing the end of the fourteenth century. During this time period, lifestyle, language, and many other things were much different compared to that of the Early Middle Ages. Christianity was a much bigger influence, and honor and knight-ship played a big role in the ideals of living and supporting the king.

Taking all this into consideration, the first evolution between the two heroes arises – the way each approaches the initial conflict. In Beowulf, the initial conflict in the story is Grendel, a monstrous creature terrorizing Hrothgar’s kingdom. Beowulf hears of this problem and sets across the high seas to conquer the beast. But the real question is, why does he do this in the first place? While it is said that Beowulf’s father had owed King Hrothgar a favor, therefore Beowulf returning the debt, it is more likely that Beowulf sought to solve the issue for his own personal glory.

In contrast, Sir Gawain took a much different approach to the initial conflict to arise in his tale. The story’s struggle begins during a celebration in King Arthur’s hall while he is awaiting a tale, which is answered with the entrance of the Green Knight. The Green Knight asks for an opponent for Arthur himself and his knights, and at first no one speaks, until Sir Gawain chooses to stand up in place of his king. In all honesty, Sir Gawain is hesitant of facing conflict when the Green Knight beckons, but he is the first knight to speak when his king is in a position of danger. Now this certainly isn’t for his own legend and pride, but rather for the kindness of his king and cousin, which makes him out to be a much more evolved character in literature. Instead of looking for his own personal triumph, he does it for the devotion he has to his king.

The next detail to be observed between the two texts is how the characters are after they have accomplished their goal and are basking, or not, in their victory. First there is Beowulf, who cannot really speak for his final victory against the dragon, but can so for his victory of killing Grendel and Grendel’s mother. Once after defeating Grendel, Beowulf returns to the mead hall to celebrate, delighting in the feast and the admiration of others for his skill. However, he awakens the next day to find his men, who traveled from Geatland with him, dead. At the sight of his dead men, he only thinks of revenge, which if maybe he had thought about the consequences of him killing Grendel in the first place instead of gloating, he could have been prepared for Grendel’s mother the night she came. There is not a second thought on his dead men even, he says killing Grendel’s mother is for revenge, but it can also be seen as another way to gain fame.

Next is the way Sir Gawain reacts after his supposed victory. Sir Gawain’s situation is a bit tricky, although he in a way survives the Green Knight and returns to Camelot, but considering the way he treats it, doesn’t seem as if it is a glorified victory. Sir Gawain faces the Green Knight and awaits his head severing, as he had put upon the Green Knight, but because of his semi-honesty, he is spared. Even though he was not completely honest, Sir Gawain treats this realization of turning against his chivalrous code and knightly ideals as the utmost sin and in a way punishes himself more than any other character would have. He is not boisterous with pride from returning from his mission, and certainly not exaggerating about his trip or the lies he told while on it. He is completely truthful upon his return and vows to stick strictly to the ideals he wants to represent. Sir Gawain is a much more ideal hero, one of honesty and modesty instead of overemphasized strength and self-interest.

Between these two epic poems alone, there is many differences from a fifth century hero to a fourteenth century one. From the tale of Beowulf, we have observed a very masculine and god-like described hero. Evident from the characteristics of Vikings and the culture of the Anglo-Saxons, it’s no wonder that Beowulf is presented in this light. He is the enhanced embodiment of all the characteristics of a revered Viking put into one.

Sir Gawain can also be described in this aspect as well because he too reflects an idealized vision of his time. No longer just dealing with subtle Christian overlay because of a more rigorous faith of this time, Sir Gawain is never so-closely compared to God or a holy figure. Sir Gawain is kind to the common people, modest to his companions, and most of all – human. The fifteenth century brought about a chance for this hero to be alike the many common knights supporting their king, noble and devoted, but not without flaws.

Through all these similarities, differences, and actions observed, it is easy to see how much heroes have the capability to evolve based upon the culture they reflect. No matter the poem, the pamphlet, the book, the comic, or the movie, the definition of a hero is constantly changing to fit one ideal to another. From incredibly brave and burly to unbelievably dorky and smart, it isn’t the characteristics that solely define an epic hero, but rather that actions he believe his people would want him to take. Therein lays the drastic change between a hero like Beowulf and a hero like Sir Gawain. Beowulf did not regard his people or the exalted position at which they placed him as highly as the heroes of the fifteenth century, or even of today, would. This occurred because a culture that does not regard God as the highest power, or any other religion, would seek to create a hero as their one source, their one figure for sole glory. Now since then, culture as well as the religion a group follows has greatly changed, wanting to pay a higher tribute to not just a man, but something that could have given that man those gifts. So it is not really how a hero evolves, but rather the culture and the people of the time that have evolved to reflect their hero.

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