

Student A
 ENGL245, British Survey I
 Reflective Summary
 Dr. G

Notions of a Hero in British Literature Survey, Part 1

Heroes are the hinges of adventure stories. They are the main characters, the protagonists with which the audience/reader experiences the events in a story. The evolution of the heroic image has come quite a way since its early construction in *Beowulf*. The notions of what a hero is has strayed far from its original model, small details having altered with time. Heroes have the ability to influence the cultures into which they are born, and culture in turn is able to shape the hero. Beowulf, Cu Chulainn, Gawain, Arthur, Oroonoko, and Gulliver all represent the culture of their time.

Beowulf is an epic, and may be compared to the works of Homer--the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*--not only in the respect that they are all epics, but that they were primarily told orally. An epic contains the accounts of heroes, or important characters, focusing on kings and great warriors who exhibit supernatural strength. In the story of *Beowulf*, great king Hrothgar's kingdom is under attack from the creature Grendel. Word of this creature reaches Beowulf, at which point he travels to Hrothgar's kingdom in order to rid them of the creature and gain honor among the Geats. Beowulf ends up destroying Grendel in perhaps the most hubristic method possible. It is his contention that as Grendel fights unarmed and naked, so must he.

I am no weaker in the works of war,
 No less grappler than Grendel himself.
 Soon I shall sink him into his death sleep,
 Not with my sword but solely by strength.
 He is unschooled in skills to strike against me,
 To shatter my shield, though feared for his fierceness.
 So shall I bear no blade in the night
 If he sees fit to fight without weapons.
 May God in His wisdom grant whom He wills
 Blessing in battle.
 (Damrosch, "Beowulf" 603)

It is this sort of boastful attitude that was so well received by the Anglo Saxon audience. They appreciated this boastful story telling as well as the exaggerated sense of bravery and heroism exhibited by Beowulf. It is apparent that *Beowulf* relies heavily on the ideas which were laid down by Greek mythology. The common use of supernatural creatures and gods in Greek mythology easily transfers over to Beowulf. Beowulf, the hero, is reminiscent of almost any of the heroes featured in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. The heroes in any of the stories all possess super strength, unquestionable honor and integrity, are devoid of fear or hesitation; and are truly thought to be a man to model one's life after.

The heroes that soon follow Beowulf's lead in literature possess many of his attributes and become more in depth with weaknesses and internal problems. One example is Cu Chulainn (an Irish hero), whose mother is a goddess and his father a possible pagan god. The stories of Cu Chulainn are very similar to the stories of Greek mythological heroes, such as Achilles or Ajax. Cu Chulainn's stories have more in common with Greek mythology than *Beowulf* does, though. The inclusion of gods masquerading as mortals, and the intrigue between gods and mortals is very similar to Greek mythology. The Irish culture seems to utilize a more humble, and comical approach to storytelling. The view of what a prodigious hero should be like still had not changed since Beowulf. Cu Chulainn was an impressive figure even while young. "Conchobor thought all this wonderful. He asked if the boy's deeds would be similarly distinguished when he became a man, and everyone said that they would be" (Damrosh 99).

Cu Chulainn's stories were not entirely a continuation of already held views, though. One action that was mostly unheard of in Greek mythology was that of a mortal defying a god in such a personal manner. The importance of this is that gods were no longer seen as untouchable as they had been before. Instead, a common man or woman could defy them for their own beliefs or reasons. An example of this is when Deichtine became pregnant by an ethereal being, and disbelieving the god's words she aborted the child for fear of it being her father's, circumstances very similar to a Greek tragedy. This conscious obstruction of the gods' will could be construed as a declining difference in social classes of the period. Instead of having the extremely wealthy aristocratic group as were present in Greece and Rome, there may have been some recognition of the power of the people, of peasants realizing that they could stand up and defy those who were above them, much as the characters in their stories do. Unfortunately this is limited to the Irish folk lore, as the English did not express such a democratic idea until later; this may give cause to Ireland's

constant rebellions throughout history. This is a clear example of how heroes of mythology might affect a culture.

Arthur is a continuance of Cu Chulainn's birth type, in which Arthur was born by a series of deceptions by his father, Uther Pendragon. In this case, Arthur's father used magic to disguise himself in order to become intimate with Igraine. While neither of his parents were ethereal beings, magic-like actions were responsible. Arthur's image in the writings by Geoffrey Monmouth *History of the Kings of Britain* is similar to that of *Beowulf*, minus Beowulf's arrogance and overwhelming pride. Arthur is seen as a man above most in his sense of justice, resolve and honor. "In Arthur courage was closely linked with generosity" (Damrosch 175). Instead of being boastful, he is appropriately humble, unless provoked. Not only is Arthur seen as a man very capable in battle, but in politics and court as well, as is shown in *Le Morte Darthur*. In book five, chapter three of *Le Morte Darthur*, Arthur dictates to his court in York of how his empire should be managed in the case of his death. He decided that in the event of his death, his wife would take the throne, which would then fall to Lancelot, as Lancelot and Guinevere were engaged in adulterous affairs (Caxton). Arthur was obviously aware of the functioning of politics and the court, and worked with it, rather than against it. This was the first deviation from the previous portrayal of heroes, by having skill in finesse as well as bravery. Arthur's career as a King began at the age of 15; he was entitled to greatness since his birth, just as Cu Chulainn had been. As Damrosch says, "he was of outstanding courage and generosity, and his inborn goodness gave him such grace that he was loved by almost all people."

Members of Arthur's court were also recognized as heroes. Stories such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* speak of an even more gentle hero than Arthur. Gawain seems to be a new breed of hero at this point. Instead of falling in with the Beowulf image of brutality, Gawain retains a proper composure. Instead of including much combat in the story, he is tested on his good will and demeanor; specifically, to refrain from sexual contact with another man's wife in that man's absence. The story includes intrigue, lies, and disguises; more a battle of morals than physical combat. Despite his willingness to trade axe blows with the Green Knight, hearkening back to the militaristic hero, Gawain still retains the gentle image.

The antagonist on the opposite end of the spectrum-The Green Knight-has similar attributes to those of *Beowulf*, believing heavily in pride and honor, intent on contest. The antagonist having the same characteristics as Beowulf is

certainly a change in the expectations of what a hero should be. This exchange in values previously thought of as good turning to evil can be tied to the practice of the Christian religion in English culture. When *Beowulf* was written, Christianity was just becoming a recognized and widely practiced religion. It can be said that *Beowulf* possessed a great deal of pride; which is a mortal sin in the Christian religion. It is apparent that the attributes of Gawain were dictated by his religious affiliation. As such, he has little to no pride. In the respect of simple brutality, the Green Knight's constitution is very similar to *Beowulf*'s; and even for their likeness, the Green Knight is demonized. This is a prime example of radically changing values in a society.

Oroonoko differs from the previous models of heroes in one glaringly obvious detail: he is not English. In fact, Oroonoko is an African Prince enslaved by the English. This sudden change in a heroic figure can be attributed to the author, Aphra Behn. It is perhaps that because Behn is a woman that she chose such a character as her story's hero. She may have been attempting to embody her own heroic abilities into that of a character that would be well received by the public, a man. While Oroonoko differs in the superficial details, he is very alike to Sir Gawain. His trials are caused by his love for the beautiful Imoinda, just as Gawain's were caused by the woman of the Green Knight's household. While Oroonoko still carries on the traits of bravery and valor, his abilities are much diminished from the infallible King Arthur, Cu Chullainn, and *Beowulf*. Evidence of this is his capture and enslavement, at which point his name is changed to Caesar. This is a depiction of outward submission, while retaining inward strength. It is similar to Gawain's submission to the Green Knight in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." These weaknesses in heroes are more akin to Greek tragedies than that of an epic. It is as Behn states, "I do not pretend, in giving you the history of this royal slave, to entertain my reader with the adventures of a feigned hero, whose life and fortunes Fancy may manage at the poet's pleasure; nor in relating the truth, design to adorn it with any accidents..." It is here that a change in the resolution of a hero is seen.

The change in heroes was more drastic as time went on. *Gulliver* was a common man with no attributes in common to that of King Arthur, other than his sense of right and wrong. The stories around the time period of *Gulliver* included heroes that had little to no physical brawn, but were instead men of thought, reflecting a more intellectual culture. It is a clear depiction that heroes did not only help shape a culture, but were in turn shaped by the culture itself. While the story of a great warrior might promote bravery and valiant acts in combat, a sudden burst of innovative thought can in turn change the idea of

what it means to be a hero. In fact, it is at this point that the term “hero” could be exchanged for that of “protagonist.” The incredibly un-hero-like behavior exhibited by Gulliver, is a slap in the face to the honorable behaviors of those before him. This is illustrated for instance in his return to wife and family: “during the first year I could not endure my wife or children in my presence, the very smell of them was intolerable, much less could I suffer them to eat in the same room.”

It was after the passing of King Arthur that the true Beowulf type heroes began to lose their appeal. People no longer wanted to hear stories of complete fiction, or unbelievable nonfiction. Instead they preferred pieces of drama with more complexities; as the late Arthurian works had begun to be. It seems as if the brute-like qualities of a hero have lost their appeal, in favor of more realistic qualities and weaknesses; turning the strong and brave into fools, and the weaker but more clever into those who would make unlikely heroes. In following decades, literature’s heroes were not used in order to perpetuate an image of bravery and combat prowess, but to channel the author’s thoughts instead. The notion of a hero changed between Beowulf and Gulliver. From the brute force that fought for glory, honor, and justice, to Gawain’s and Oroonoko’s submission to their enemies, to the man whose biggest obstacle was putting up with humanity, after his short stint away from them, each of these heroes has an individual story to tell, including personal weaknesses and struggles to overcome. Yet each reflects the culture into which he was born.

Works Cited

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