

Comparing complexity in the characters of beowulf and lady chatterleys lover essa...

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The complexity of the characters in a written work is often a significant method to invest the reader in a given work – following people who have interesting stories and who change over the course of the plot is one of the biggest draws to a work of fiction. As time passes, it can be thought that a greater emphasis on psychological complexity can be found in fiction; as society and language develops, there exist more complex problems that must be addressed. This can be seen in the epic poem *Beowulf*, there is not as much complex psychological development within the characters as there is in more modern works, many of them exemplifying ideals of perfect heroes. In this essay, the major characters of *Beowulf* will be evaluated in terms of their complexity compared to the complexity found in the characters of D. H. Lawrence's 1928 novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

The titular character of *Beowulf* is the quintessential perfect hero, who does everything right and does not falter in his attitudes and judgments. The poem shows two different sides of *Beowulf*'s heroism – one is a wilder, more idealistic hero who is focused on physical feats, especially when he fights the Grendel. In the second part he is a more stoic, wise king, with different responsibilities and priorities than the warrior. Despite this change in attitude, this is portrayed as mostly normal and idealized emotional development, as he encounters very few personal obstacles and difficulties along the way. He does not make mistakes, being both a great warrior and a great king, for the majority of the book. The one most important and interesting choice he makes in the book is his rash fight against the dragon; it is possible that the king surrendered to youthful hubris at the end by taking on an opponent too strong for him, and that led to his downfall.

The protagonist of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, on the other hand, is far more complicated and polarizing. Lady Chatterley, a strong, progressive woman, becomes married to an ineffectual, unromantic husband, despite the status it lends her. Over the course of the novel, she learns to become a sexual being, and eschews the coldness of aristocracy for the vibrant passionate life that she truly wants. From the beginning of the book to the end, Lady Chatterley goes a dramatic transformation, from caged progressive to free lover, offering a controversial attitude toward sex and fidelity as she leaves her husband for the gamekeeper Oliver.

Beowulf has his own demon to fight in the form of Grendel. Perhaps one of the most interesting and complex characters in the poem, Grendel is perhaps more misunderstood than villainous. Grendel's motivation for his violence is far from evil, but instead rooted in bitterness and resentment for being cast out from society. Being one of "Cain's clan, whom the creator had outlawed / and condemned as outcasts," he is forever incensed about his banishment and his exile to the swamps (p. 36). This leads to his villainous actions; despite the fact that he will "never show remorse," there is at least a reason for these actions (p. 37).

The love interest of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* offers her demons of a different kind; Oliver Mellors, the gamekeeper, is a far cry more interesting than Lady Chatterley's husband, though he does not know it. He is far from a scoundrel who steals away a woman from her husband; he and Lady Chatterley truly find each other, Oliver developing out of his isolation caused by poor health and a broken heart. All throughout, however, he offers Lady Chatterley a rare

chance at lust and excitement, something that is missing from her boring, aristocratic husband. He is both noble and practical, offering a sophisticated mix of savagery and sophistication that is indicative of modern literature.

Beowulf has a polar opposite character in Unferth; he acts as the titular character's foil, directly opposing the ideals and perfection that Beowulf exemplifies. While Beowulf is confident and noble, Unferth is brash and headstrong. The book clearly paints him as less of a man than Beowulf, and someone to look down upon. By offering up his sword for the fight with Grendel's mother, Unferth merely shows that he is too cowardly to fight her; he is also very jealous of how glorified Beowulf has become to others.

The third part of the Lady Chatterley love triangle is as much an inert force as Unferth is in Beowulf; Clifford Chatterley, Lady Chatterley's husband, is both physically and emotionally impotent, being paralyzed from the waist down. His primary concern is with earning money and having business; having a wife is almost a secondary concern for him, which stems from his lack of a sex life. "It was the last bit of passion left in these men: the passion for making a display. Sexually they were passionless, even dead" (p. 75). He no longer wants love; instead he wants to become famous and successful as a writer and entrepreneur. His character, of the three, represents an abstract force (English nobility) more than a character to the greatest degree, but much of his outward motivations are established by the subtext of his injury, which has steered his priorities in other directions. Even though he can seem like a cartoonish villain at times, that motivation is

definitely driven by the tragedy of his paralysis, which lends him a greater complexity (p. 100).

In conclusion, the ideas of character complexity are more present in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* than they are in *Beowulf*. Nonetheless, they both exist in many ways - while *Beowulf* is all about Beowulf himself succeeding in various battles through life in a very heroic way, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is all about a woman fighting the morals of polite society in order to come into her own as a woman. These two protagonists could not be more different, as *Beowulf* is offered as the ideal man for the reader of the book to emulate, while *Lady Chatterley* manages to grow and change into a polarizing, but interesting, character. In terms of the supporting characters, however, there is a surprising amount of complexity in *Beowulf*, from the motivation behind Grendel's villainy to Unferth's underlying jealousy of Beowulf's greatness leading him to his own unkind actions. Overall, both works exemplify characters with emotional complexity, but *Lady Chatterley's Lover's* characters possess a larger number of internal and interpersonal conflicts, lending greater sophistication to their relationships.

Works Cited

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