

# Example of heroism in the tales of beowulf and sir gawain and the green knight es...

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Over the course of the several decades, numerous romantic tales and epics have been penned. Epics are basically tales of warriors with heroic traits, capable of performing superhuman feats and fearlessly saving the nation and the damsel in distress from a terrible fate. In most tales of romance, captivating adventures as well as exciting experiences usually occur. The Anglo-Saxon poem, *Beowulf*, happens to be one of the most renowned epics in the world. The eponymous character of *Beowulf* is a strong and brave hero whose ferocity and skill in battle helps save the clan of King Hrothgar. *Beowulf* later is crowned the king and he rules in a just and noble manner. “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” was written much later than *Beowulf*. The romantic poem, along with *Le Morte d’Arthur*, portrays Gawain as a chivalrous knight who possesses some of the personal qualities of *Beowulf*. Even though an extended duration of hundred years had passed between the writing of both works and they did not even belong to the same era, both works somehow manage to show the way in which people have remained unchanged with time. They both deal with a mighty heroic character who serves as the physical representation of various virtues. The primary aim of this paper is to compare and contrast the various aspects of two famous works of literature, *Beowulf* and *Gawain and the Green Knight*. Most of the opinions have been backed by concrete proof in the form of lines from the text. The paper seeks to explore both the differences and similarities in the theme of both works as well as their styles, usage of language and characterization.

In both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Beowulf*, the titular heroes seek revenge. The concept of revenge, in fact, serves as the driving force behind

the entire plot behind the poem, Beowulf. The character of Beowulf looks to avenge King Hrothgar whose closest friend had met his doom at the hands of the mother of the terrible monster, Grendel. Beowulf unhesitatingly ventures into the swamo, the lair of Grendel's mother and slays her with the powerful stroke of his sword. This action is rather ironic since Grendel's mother had slain the king's friend only because he had been responsible for the death of Grendel . In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the character of Sir Gawain bears a dark hatred for Lancelot, one of the most famous knights in the court of King Arthur. Lancelot had killed both brothers of Gawain in order to save the love of his life, Guinevere . The motivations behind their revenge bore strong similarities but in case of Gawain, his " justification" for the death of his brothers cannot be considered brave or noble due to the personality traits of Lancelot. While hatred acts as the driving force behind Sir Gawain's actions, Beowulf initiated revenge against the mother of the monster Grendel due to his sworn allegiance to King Hrothgar.

### **The leader of the troop unlocked his word-hoard; The Geat hero**

the distinguished one delivered this answer:

**“ We belong by birth to the Geat people mission**

and owe allegiance to Lord Hygelac.” (Heaney, 19, 258-261)

Beowulf is such a powerful character that his name alone serves as the title of the epic poem. His presence alone and his personality hold the attention of the readers of the work. The manner in which he reveals his name comes

across not only as resolute and forceful but establishes him as the key power in every scene.

### **The man whose name was known for courage, Beowulf announces**

the Geat leader, resolute in his helmet,  
answered in return: " We are retainers

### **The introduction of the Green Knight in the poem, on the other hand, indicates energy and strength –**

through the hall door rushed a champion, fierce and fell, Highest in stature he, of all on earth who dwell! From neck to waist so square, and eke so thickly set, His loins and limbs alike, so long they were, and great, Half giant upon earth, I hold him to have been, In every way of man the tallest he, I ween –The merriest in his might that e'er a joust might ride, Sternly his body framed in back, and breast, and side, Belly and waist alike were fitly formed, and small, Even so his features were sharply cut withal, and clean, Men marvelled at his hue, So was his semblance seen, He fared as one on feud, And overall was green! (Weston, 6-7, VII)

The description of the green knight in contrast to Sir Gawain impresses the readers immensely. He seems to radiate power not unlike the Anglo-Saxon character, Beowulf, and he represents a figure of authority and chivalry. He is referred to as the " gallant knight" (Weston, 7, VIII) and he seems to " worthily" ride his mysterious green horse. So, the Green Knight appears to bear more in common with Beowulf rather than Sir Gawain based on their respective introductions in the play. However, Gawain manages to redeem

himself and prove that he is a worthy member of the knights of King Arthur in the course of the poem.

There is little doubt that Sir Gawain and Beowulf were both extremely noble and brave men in their respective areas. Beowulf has served as the savior to King Hrothgar's men from Grendel when the monster was constantly terrorizing the poor people. Until Beowulf had arrived at the scene, no one else had the required physical strength and mental agility to defeat Grendel once and for all. Beowulf retained his courage till his demise. Even during his final battle, he was adamant to exhibit his strength as a warrior –

I risked my life often when I was young. Now I am old, but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight for the glory of winning, if the evil one will only abandon his earth-fort and face me in the open. (Heaney, 170-71, 2511-15)

In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the Green Knight comes to find a challenger who will be strong enough to cut his head off. Nobody in King Arthur's court rises to the occasion, not even the famous knights, and so it is up to King Arthur himself to finish the task. Sir Gawain realizes that doing so might put the king's life at risk and so, he accepts the challenge of the Green Knight on behalf of the king. One aspect of the Green Knight's challenge was that he would try to chop off Gawain's head within the span of twelve months and a day. Sir Gawain showcases his noble personality as well as his courageousness when he takes the fight directly to the Green Knight when the stipulated time comes to an end. Even though he is fearful for his wellbeing, he stands completely still when the Green Knight gets ready to take his head off cleanly with one blow. The conversation between Gawain

and the Green Knight highlights how Gawain is ready to accept the fate that will be bestowed on him -

But haste thee, man, I' faith, thy task to end to bring, Deal me my destiny,  
make no more dallying, For I will stand thy stroke, and start no more, I trow,  
Till thine axe hitteth me - my word be gage enow!"

(Weston, 76, XIII)

Though both the poems were written almost after an interval of hundred years, both Beowulf and Sir Gawain shared heroic and noble qualities. Since Beowulf happens to be an epic of the highest order while Sir Gawain and the Green Knight falls under the category of romance, the method used by the respective writers to express their unique qualities are not completely similar but both the characters still exhibit heroic traits in specific situations. The epic narrative of Beowulf is bound to showcase that the hero is the noblest of men in every aspect of the poem. But Sir Gawain does not offer the impression that he is faultless. He has his fair share of laws but he manages to triumph over them in the end.

Beowulf, on the other hand, serves as the perfect king and hero. Having proven his worth at an early age, his rise to prominence seeks to inspire the readers. The style of the narrative has been carefully structured and rendered to allow the reader to perceive two separate types of heroism - the passionate heroism of youth and the heroism of a wiser, older and more experienced warrior. During his youth, Beowulf's heroic characteristics have been emphasized. Beowulf's very name had become synonymous with incredible feats of courage and so, his heroic code compelled him to defend his people at all times.

Even though the plots and setting of Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are disparate, the major themes in each of the works bear similarities. Both these classic works of literature present a central heroic character who has been endowed with physical, intellectual and psychological prowess. He is thus equipped to deal with the task of confronting various challenges to his authority. The themes of the epic journey and heroism are highlighted in the text. Sir Gawain and Beowulf have both been presented by their respective authors as special character types whose behavior needs to be carefully emulated in order to help progress society. The minor flaws present in the characters of both the heroes help to teach vital life lessons to the reader. These heroes constantly need to be alerted to the probable threats resulting out of evil forces who want to cause harm and disrupt society. But both will protect their loved ones even at the cost of their own lives. The following words echoed by Beowulf help the readers understand the extent of his devotion to his people -

**“ I shall win the gold by my courage, or else mortal combat, doom of battle, will bear your lord away.”**

(Heaney, 171, 2535-37)

Like Beowulf, Sir Gawain has all the necessary traits of a hero and like Beowulf; he appears to be thoroughly invested in safeguarding his reputation, especially in public. Through Beowulf, readers can understand how important it is to pass the torch on to the next generation and with maturity, warriors must learn to relinquish their urge to fight and teach the younger society members the perfect steps to perpetuate the constant good in the fight between good and evil. Both Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the

Green Knight are rife with heroic lessons that remain relevant in the contemporary era .

## **Works Cited**

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