

Compare and contrast images of heroism in these two poems

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Heroism is a trait that we seem to have no problem identifying, yet when asked to define what a hero is a myriad of answers emerge. This phenomenon is not unique to today's society; the definition of a hero is something that is constantly under revision and debate. An example of this can be seen in two older pieces of English literature: *Beowulf*, written circa 750-900, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written circa 1375-1400. These stories both have a main character that possesses heroic qualities, many of which are very similar.

Gawain's identity as a hero is not clearly demonstrated, but when compared with *Beowulf*, who is demonstrated to be a hero, his merits earn him that title as well. Exactly what defines a heroic act, or a hero for that matter? Often times we dismiss the question due to its complex nature. But when confronted with an individual with heroic qualities we readily identify them as a hero. So what set of traits makes up this amorphous definition that we call hero? I would agree that the very definition is one that is dependent upon the time and society in which its context is being used.

A person who shot someone to save the life of another may be viewed as a hero under the scrutiny of one culture, but in a different time or location the very opposite may be true. Nevertheless, heroes exist and possess these ever-changing heroic qualities. *Beowulf* is clearly demonstrated to be a hero, and we can observe the qualities he possesses to enable him to have that title. While *Sir Gawain's* heroic accomplishments are a little more debatable, I would argue that he deserves the same title; he exudes qualities which can be considered heroic in the context of Arthurian Legend as well as today.

Although we can attribute no authorship to Beowulf or Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, we can see that Beowulf was meant to be a hero and if nothing else, Gawain was portrayed as the story's protagonist. One such way this was done was by having neither of the main characters as all powerful rulers; in fact each Beowulf and Gawain served some sort of higher authority. Beowulf, throughout approximately 2/3 of the story serves Hrothgar. Similarly, Gawain was not ruler of his domain but served King Arthur. It is important to note that while both served other men, they were not themselves servants.

Beowulf traveled from his land to assist in the destruction of Grendel, and Gawain chose to be a knight of the Round Table and indeed viewed his service to Arthur and his kingdom as an honor. By the construct of having both main characters serve others, the author has created more capacity for heroism to become apparent. If the President of the United States were to prevent nuclear war, the people would obviously be relieved and grateful that he fulfilled his duty. If a soldier on the field accomplished the same task, he would be regarded as a true hero.

Transcending one's traditional role and going above and beyond is a characteristic which helps to set heroes apart from other people. Sir Gawain goes above and beyond his role when declaring his intention to battle the Green Knight. " I would come to your counsel before your court noble. /For I find it not fit, as in faith it is known, /When such a boon is begged before all these knights, /Though you be tempted thereto, to take it on yourself" (lines 347-350) King Arthur at this point had already accepted the challenge, yet

Gawain decided to take his place because he was aware of the danger and risk involved in letting the King fight.

He admits just a few lines later that " I am the weakest, well I know, and of wit feeblest; /And the loss of my life would be least of any;" (lines 354-355)

This indication that his ability to fight is low makes his decision to fight that much more heroic, and this is all done in the name of Arthur. Beowulf, on the other hand, does not have an issue of inferior strength, but quite the opposite- he seems to possess a sort of superhuman strength. Even so, his level of self restraint and wisdom prevents him from overthrowing Hrothgar despite his superior abilities.

This amount of loyalty and service is a trait that helps develop his character even further as a hero. Both Gawain and Beowulf having been in similar instances serving a higher authority have shown heroic qualities although they may have differed. While the two main characters in discussion are being portrayed as heroes, they are still human and have fallibilities. It is the dynamic experience, the rise and fall of these characters which makes them real and human, that shows what they are truly made of.

This insight may prove to be disappointing or disheartening for many, I find the revelation to be comforting as it reasserts that a hero isn't an idyllic state but a condition which can be humanly attained. Beowulf's rise and fall is demonstrated rather clearly throughout the progression of the story. At his peak, he kills Grendel with his bare hands. In the second encounter with Grendel's mother he is victorious, but requires the use of armor and the sword Hrunting. As time passes, he becomes king.

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He helps to slay the dragon that is terrorizing the land with the assistance of Wiglaf and his men, but at the cost of his life. This failure of his strength is foreshadowed earlier by Hrothgar, "Choose dear Beowulf, the better part, /eternal rewards. Don't give way to pride. /For a brief while your strength is in bloom/ but it fades quickly" (lines 1759-1762). Beowulf's wisdom, which he relies on throughout the story even diminishes as he faces the dragon, as shown when he elects to strike first by himself with full knowledge that his strength is not as great as it used to be.

Another interesting point is that while in the service of Hrothgar his heroic qualities are shown through but when he became leader, he was still a hero but many of the qualities such as his wisdom and strength in this instance have decreased. Likewise to Beowulf, Gawain experiences a rise and fall. His circumstance is slightly different than Beowulf's however. Gawain's worthiness to even be named a hero is often put into question, and his final deeds tend to overshadow the previous ones when that consideration is made.

This is an unfair judgment as no one would rescind Beowulf's status as a hero because of his pride blinding his judgment towards the end of his life, but would still consider him a hero because of his previous heroic actions. The same is true of Sir Gawain. Near the end of the story when he thinks he will die and flinches when the ax is coming down on his neck, he's viewed as a coward. I'll concede that it was a cowardly thing to do, but then I'm forced to ask the rhetorical question, "What would you do?" Moments later, Gawain recomposes himself, doesn't flinch and gets nicked.

Of course, one could argue that Gawain is a coward disguised as a hero because of his protest to the Green Knight claiming his debt is paid, and that he decided to use the green girdle. First of all, Gawain spends the rest of his days lamenting his decision to use the girdle, so he isn't ignorant of what he has done. Secondly, there is absolutely nothing heroic about dying without a cause, which is what would have been the case had the Green Knight carried out his threat. I see no harm done in preparing oneself for an encounter such as the one he went through.

We often laude heroes for their cunning in wisdom, so why should those same traits in Gawain be looked upon negatively? While there are many more facets to declaring someone a hero, these are a few that both Beowulf and Gawain share. Beowulf demonstrates that its namesake is a man who is supposed to be regarded as a hero. This same intent is not made in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, but when the two are compared with each other, Sir Gawain is shown to be a hero, not a simple coward that he may initially appear to be.