

Beowulf and sir gawain's heroism, as a literary archetype essay sample



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In examination of literature, one may notice many different and reoccurring archetypes that give shape to many of our favorite characters in history and the present. These archetypes often follow patterns of similarity, but can be most interesting because of their variances. One of the most prevalent archetypes in literature, throughout history is "The Hero", and the basic character traits which a hero may possess. Although different societies may reveal their own individual ideologies through the characteristics of their heroes, the hero and the hero's journey are two of the unifying features of literature that can be found across all cultures, and has defined much of the literature in human history.

This myth occurs so frequently in literature that readers often can predict the outcome of novels based on it. Upon analysis of Sir Gawain and The Green Knight and Beowulf, I noticed the archetypal heroic qualities characters Sir Gawain and Beowulf possess. These character's qualities are contrastable because of different societal influence and time frame in which they were written; yet the qualities are also quite comparable due to their basic structure. Heroism, as a literary archetype, can be defined by distinctive bravery, honor, sense of duty, and adherence to the given society's code of behavior, where the hero experiences a personal journey and the inevitability of human imperfections.

Beowulf's bravery is evident when he shows such immense courage upon being faced with the challenge of protecting King Hrothgar and his people against Grendel and Grendel's mother in Beowulf. He doesn't just take on the challenging task, but he does it with strength with persistence, in spite of all the stories he hears about Grendel, he still fights the beast without any

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hesitation, showing the great strength in his heroism. "Stoutness of heart, bravery not banishment, must have brought you to Hrothgar." (Beowulf, p. 39, Lines 338-339) When he battles with Grendel, he does it without the usual things that everyone else would surely use—weapons. "I hereby renounce sword and the shelter of the broad shield, the heavy war-board: hand to hand is how it will be, a life-and-death fight with a fiend." (Beowulf, p. 41, Lines 436-440)

This shows that Beowulf is not scared, or at least can easily conquer his fear, and let his arrogant mentality guide him to believe that no one can defeat him. This indeed keeps Beowulf from quitting at a time that any average person would have been most likely to. Sir Gawain also shows a similar bravery in his acceptance of The Green Knight's challenge in *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, although he is more hesitant than Beowulf, he too is able to conquer his fear, and face the challenge that the Green Knight presents to King Arthur with bravery.

The heroic trait of honor is to show a sense of integrity in one's actions.

When Beowulf went to the land of the Danes to kill Grendel, he did it not because he wanted money, but because he wanted to help the Geats.

Beowulf felt as if it was the right thing to do since he had been successful in past deeds as "There was no one else like him alive. In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth, highborn and powerful." (Beowulf, p. 36, Lines 196-198) Beowulf expected no reward for his action, but rather just being able to

'put another notch in his belt' with "the privilege of purifying Heorot,"

(Beowulf, p. 41, Line 431) was enough motivation for his actions. Beowulf

loved the glory in his younger years that came from being a warrior, and was <https://assignbuster.com/beowulf-and-sir-gawains-heroism-as-a-literary-archetype-essay-sample/>

to receive lavish gifts from King Hrothgar in return for Grendel's demise, as the King spoke in line 385 (p. 40), " I will recompense him with a rich treasure." however, these gifts were certainly not Beowulf's motivation. Sir Gawain's honor is evident, as Beowulf's is, when he does not succumb to the temptation of Bertilak's wife. Although he is attracted to her, he manages to resist the beautiful young woman in preservation of his honor, and she recognizing his strength speaks, " And you are the noblest knight known in your time...And here by your side I have sat for two days Yet never has a fair phrase fallen from your lips Of the language of love, not one little word!" (Sir Gawain and The Green Knight, p. 189, Lines 1520-1524).

Beowulf's strong sense of duty is an intricate part of being a hero, and goes hand in hand with honor and bravery. This sense of duty means that he is always committed to his people, his king, and their protection. A model of this is in his third encounter, when he goes to fight his last battle against the dragon. He realizes that he will probably not be returning victorious from this battle. In other words, he will die. In lines 2419-2423 (p. 84), it says, " He was sad at heart, unsettled yet ready, sensing his death. His fate hovered near; unknowable but certain: it would soon claim his coffered soul, part life from limb." This basically means that fate was soon to run its course and he would lose his life in battle. He still went along with this final battle because he was the king and it was his heroic and kingly responsibility to provide security for his people. However, even though it was his kingly responsibility, he didn't have to do it; he wasn't forced into it. Beowulf is " a daunting man, dangerous in action and eager for it always." (Beowulf, p. 45, Lines 629-630) in his earlier days, and this attribute is still lingering with him in his maturity.

He did it by choice, when many others would have run away in the face of a challenge they knew would be fatal. This is a true distinctive quality of the heroic archetype, which is unquestionably one of the most defining between an ordinary person and a true hero.

Sir Gawain faces a similarly dutiful task to Beowulf when he is faced with the Green Knight in King Arthur's court. The Green Knight's appearance has shocked the crowd into silence, and the Green Knight begins to question the reputation of Arthur's followers, claiming that their failure to respond proves them cowards. When Arthur blushes and steps forth to defend his court, Gawain stands up and requests that he be allowed to take the challenge himself. " I beseech, before all here, That this melee may be mine." (Sir Gawain and The Green Knight, p. 165, Lines 341-342) He does not have to step up and face the game of the green knight, but he does so because he feels that it is his duty as an honorable knight to protect the king, as " the loss of my life would be least of any" (Sir Gawain and The Green Knight, p. 165, Line 355), meaning that the loss of his life through this game, would not be as great as the loss of King Arthur.

A good deal of Beowulf is dedicated to demonstrating the Germanic heroic code that is based on the heroic warrior values of courage, strength, and loyalty. In heroic kings generosity, hospitality, and political skills are essentials of the code. Traditional and greatly valued, the characters' ethical judgments come from the code's direction. " In 8th century feudal society, the possession of treasure, gold, famous swords, and mail/helmets regulated loyalty, allegiance and protection...The Lord with the most treasure, bravery and fame would become King; the throne was then passed down to younger

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generations of great warriors...The entire system was based on a Germanic heroic code of honor...A King was a "ring-giver," because gold often came in rings, also a symbol of loyalty or sacred vows." (Book Rags, Beowulf study guide) Beowulf is seen as wise and honorable when he first arrives at Heorot.

Hrothgar's watchman, seeing Beowulf and his men arrive on shore, can only judge them by their appearance in their armor and weaponry "Nor have I seen a mightier man-at-arms on this earth than the one standing here: unless I am mistaken, he is truly noble." (Beowulf, p. 37, Lines 247-250) The code is also frequently the cause of tension among the ethics of medieval Christianity. Even as the code says that honor is achieved throughout life by good deeds and actions, Christianity declares that glory is in the afterlife. Likewise, as the warrior customs dictate that it is better to get revenge than to mourn, Christian principle supports a peaceful, tolerant attitude toward opponents. The unknown poet attempts to accommodate these two differing sets of values during Beowulf, and although he is a Christian, he cannot refute the primary pagan principles of the poem.

Sir Gawain is governed by a well-defined code of behavior, known as the code of chivalry, which forms the values and proceedings of Sir Gawain throughout Sir Gawain and The Green Knight. Gawain knightly qualities differ from Beowulf's warrior qualities here, as he is less brutal than Beowulf, and more courteous. "I am the weakest, well I know, and of wit feeblest; And the loss of my life would be least of any;" (Sir Gawain and The Green Knight, p. 165, Lines 354-355) This shows that Gawain is also a very modest person, which is perhaps part to do with his gentle personality and part to do with the code of chivalry. The knightly chivalry principles come together in <https://assignbuster.com/beowulf-and-sir-gawains-heroism-as-a-literary-archetype-essay-sample/>

Gawain's shield. The highly symbolic pentangle signify the five virtues of knights: chastity, courtesy, piety, generosity, and friendship. Throughout the poem, Gawain's devotion to these virtues is tested along with a matter bigger than Gawain's personal virtue: that is, whether heavenly virtue can function in a fallen world. Therefore, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* what is really being tested may be the chivalric system itself, as signified by Camelot.

Throughout the course of *Beowulf*, we observe a great change and personal journey as *Beowulf* matures from a fearless warrior into a wise leader and King. His change reveals that a differing set of values go along with both of his two functions (warrior and leader). The variation between these two sets of values is apparent early on in the outlooks of *Beowulf* and King *Hrothgar*. Where the young *Beowulf*, having nothing to lose, wishes personal glory, the matured *Hrothgar*, having a great deal to lose, seeks out security for his people. As the values of the warrior grow to be clear through *Beowulf's* young example in the poem (strength, courage, and loyalty), infrequently are the responsibilities of a king in relation to his people discussed (hospitable, generous, and having great political skill). *Beowulf's* personal journey is essentially maturation from one phase of his life to another, showing heroism in two separate phases. *Sir Gawain's* personal journey differs from *Beowulf's*, in that it is both a journey in the physical sense (finding the Green Knight's castle) and a journey into his own sense of honor.

. Human error is inevitable, even in the heroic characters of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain*. In the opinion of some of the Geats, *Beowulf's* daring encounter with <https://assignbuster.com/beowulf-and-sir-gawains-heroism-as-a-literary-archetype-essay-sample/>

the dragon is morally ambiguous because it dooms them to be alone, without a King's protection, making them susceptible to attack by their enemies. Is this a fault of Beowulf, to leave his people susceptible and alone? Or did he do the right thing by putting his life on the line to protect them? This is certainly a matter of opinion, and cannot be decided indefinitely. Though, either way, his heroic character guided him with the intent of protecting his people, perhaps the best way he knew how. Similarly, Gawain's character shows human error when he draws back from the Green Knight's axe, which is a falter in his bravery. His taking of the lady's gift (green girdle) is a slip in honesty when he does not give it up to Bertilak at the end of the day. However, this teaches him that although he may be the most chivalrous knight in the land, he is still human and quite capable of fault. The lesson Gawain discovers from the Green Knight's challenge is that, despite his heroic nature, he is still just a physical being who is concerned with his own life above all else. His code of Chivalry offers an important set of principles toward which to strive, but an individual must above all continue be conscious of his own mortality and weakness.

Beowulf and Sir Gawain are despite any small flaws, certainly looked upon as historical heroes in literature. The story of their life/journey, although seemingly different, is shown to follow somewhat of a similar pattern, with common valued heroic characteristics that are still prevalent in today's literature. Honor, being a key trait of a hero, fuels a sense of duty, which requires bravery to complete. These key traits take Beowulf, Sir Gawain, and many other heroic characters in literature on personal journeys of growth, maturation, and adventure. And on this journey encountering some very

human errors, making the reader realize that even the most exemplary personalities will inevitably falter at some point, it's simply human nature.