

# Evolution of a legacy research paper example

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## **The Hero-Warrior Ideal in Western Literature**

Stories of the hero-warrior in literature trace the progress of Western civilization and the inexorable influence of Christianity. The heroic ideal is one in which the accomplishments and legacies of great warriors have been passed on in stories originating in ancient populations, who adopted the virtues of the hero as their own. In this way, the moral and physical worthiness of a tribe or nation could be traced to the exploits of a mighty forbear. The Romans, for example, exhibited this phenomenon in their claims to have preserved and carried on the martial greatness of Troy. Heroic qualities of courage and physical strength are bestowed upon those who pass on the legacy of the hero-warrior.

Keywords: Hero-warrior, Christianity,, Romans, Troy, tribe.

## **Evolution of a Legacy: The Hero-Warrior Ideal in Western Literature**

The renowned scholar Ronald Fisher once theorized that the characteristics which came to typify the hero of Western literary tradition arose from an ancient tribal notion of conferred honor. Fisher noted that all societies that have existed in a barbaric condition formed a notion of risk taking that must ultimately result in the hero's death, a demise that nevertheless bestows long-term benefits on the hero's descendants. The "hero's imprudence could serve the fitness interests of the hero if the genetic costs of early death were offset by the benefits (transferred) ' by the prestige of the hero upon his kinsmen'" (Gotschall, p. 96). This legacy has come down to us in the form of the "super hero," an exceptional individual with tremendous

powers who places him or herself in jeopardy on behalf of the human race. It is thus that folk heroes, through their courage and consequent suffering, certify the worthiness of their people.

For the purposes of studying Western hero literature, the archetype of the death-defying, honor-craving hero begins with Achilles, Homer's nearly invulnerable super man with one fatal flaw. Hector, Achilles' mighty foil, is the hinge upon which the creation of the hero paradigm turns, the mighty but doomed *bête noire* who's reflected in every mythological super rival from Gawain's Green Knight to Super Man's arch-enemy Doomsday. There are several recurring themes in the tradition of the hero-tale, one of which is the notion of sacrifice. Fisher theorized that "the families of killed heroes bask in reflected glory and prestige, and that the genetic losses warriors suffer through early death might therefore be outweighed by the enhanced fitness of

relatives" (Gottschall, 96). There is a powerful communal bonding to be derived from the remembrance and celebration of shared glory, particularly in the certification of the collective social fitness that such stories pass on. One finds this phenomenon at work in ancient Rome, where many rulers, such as Commodus, claimed descent from Hercules. The Roman people saw themselves as descendants of the Trojan Aeneas, himself a son of Aphrodite. Such heroes embody courage, strength and all the virtues that a society claims to possess; a rectitude and incorruptibility bestowed by the sacrifice of a mighty forbear.

## **Achilles**

Achilles is the paragon of the “ unrestrained aggressive egotism of the old warrior-hero,” the pursuer of eternal renown on the field of battle (Lord, 17). Achilles’ countless bloody victims are strewn throughout the Iliad. Pity and restraint have no place in Achilles’ warrior ethic, but Homer’s epic tale takes an unexpected turn when Achilles, profoundly altered by the death of his friend, Patroclus and by Priam’s entreaties for Hector’s body, evinces a transformation of conscience. This “ transition from individual pursuit of honor at any cost, as exemplified in Achilles, to the socially controlled pursuit of a less than total victory requires a willingness to accept substitutes” (Lord, 18). As such, we bear witness to an evolution in which the mindless, bloodthirsty warrior hero changes into something rather more amenable and adaptable and, consequently, more complex, interesting and relatable to the reader (17).

Achilles’ legacy, too, becomes more complex. As witnesses of his fate, we revel in his martial conquests but still more in his personal redemption, which redeems us in the sharing.

Achilles slowly emerges from his orgy of death and destruction, awakening to “ the immense personal and social cost of his anger. In place of rage, compassion and humanity come forth and the fires of war are replaced by the cathartic flames of the hearth and the funeral pyre” (Stratford, 2010). Nevertheless, his choice has determined his fate. Told by his mother, Thetis, that he may either remain at Troy, earn lasting glory and die, or return home to a long life without valor. Having chosen the former, he accepts the

inevitability of a glorious death. “ Unlike natural flowers that go through the cycle of blooming and then wilting, this unnatural flower, this kleos, will forever stay the same, never losing its color, aroma, and overall beauty” (Harvard. edu, 2012). But true to the ethic of the classical hero-warrior, it is his glory, his kleos, that he seeks not the glory of Greece; and so it is that which humanizes Achilles and mitigates his bloodlust that makes him immortal.

## **Hector**

So it is that Achilles wins personal fame for himself. Hector, his great foe, accomplishes something quite different through his death and the sacrifice he makes for his people. Having lost Hector, the Trojans are ultimately lost; the Greeks will have the city and, true to Agamemnon’s vow, burn Troy to the ground. But Hector’s death plants a kind of seed for his people - his greatness and courage will belong to the survivors of Troy in a way that surpasses Achilles’ legacy. In the Aeneid, Virgil writes of Aeneas’ meeting with Hector’s mutilated ghost, who prophesies the replanting of the Trojan race at what will become Rome. Aeneas and Hector are pitiful figures, but Virgil assures that Aeneas’ sufferings and hopes will be “ justified by

Hector’s transfer of the Trojan legacy and by his prophecy of a new city to come” (Dufallo, 104). In this, Hector surpasses the short-sightedness of violence and glory-seeking, which even Achilles calls into question. Rather than fighting and killing for its own sake, Hector fights for the preservation of something, fights to save Andromache, his young son and his people from bondage and death.

It is for this reason that many have come to regard Hector the true hero of the Iliad. It is his sacrifice that will bear fruit, though the catastrophe that ensues in the wake of his death at Achilles' hands seems to preclude the possibility of hope for the future. Hector's courage and sacrifice, the "prestige of the hero," of which Gotschall writes (96), pass on to his kinsmen and to that slim remnant of Troy's lost greatness that escape the city's destruction. As such, Hector advances the concept of the hero-warrior. More than merely a brave, heedless killer, Troy's champion is a defender of his civilization, a preserver not only of his clan but of his society and way of life. One senses in Hector an incremental shift in values. In this sense, there is greater dimension to Hector, despite his own fondness for martial glory, than others in Homer's immortal constellation of heroes. The following words belong to Achilles, but they could just as well have come from Hector:

" For fat flocks and herds in foray may be won,  
and tripods tall, and chestnut horses;  
but the life of man when it has crossed the enclosure  
of his teeth can ne'er return" (Homer, 75).

## **Gawain**

Gawain is in many ways the fulfillment of the humane hero ideal, the antithesis of

Homer's ancient purveyors of reckless destruction. Arthur's nephew is a model of chivalric perfection, bound to his master whose life he is pledged to serve and preserve. Gawain offers something more than the other knights of Arthur's court, each of whom bear notable character flaws and weaknesses.

A scrupulously moral hero, Gawain is a virtual blueprint for the principled Christian knight errant, sworn to protect the helpless and punish oppressors of the innocent. His courage and fealty in the face of the Green Knight's challenge, and his moral behavior in resisting the advances of Bercilak's seductive wife certify his ethical integrity. And yet Gawain remains human, a man whose fear of death ultimately betrays him.

Gawain is different from others of Arthur's stellar retinue, many of whom exhibit some supernatural, or superhuman, quality. " Unlike Lancelot, Tristan and the various Grail knights, Gawain has no fixed superlative or definitive quality that restricts or directs his behavior, and he is thus allowed a different sort of freedom of actions, since his choices tend to be his own rather than the product of potion or prophecy" (Harper, 2012). As a knight whose actions determine and reflect his character, Gawain can become the quintessential Christian hero, an exemplar of chivalric faith.

The evolution of the heroic warrior ideal traces the advance of Western civilization and reflects the impression that the Christian ethos made on the hero-warrior paradigm. Homer's representation of the glory-hungry warrior hints at a barbaric past slowly giving way to a new notion, that of the hero acting in defense of his people. This notion comes full circle in the Arthurian knights, such as the faithful, though flawed, Gawain. Common to them all are the qualities of courage, strength and physical worthiness they bestow upon those who pass along and claim a part of their legacies.

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