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## Self-Assurance and Literature

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### Self-Assurance and Literature

Recognizing our faults and failures is no voluntary task. We are cautious, almost reluctant, to do so as those shortcomings cast a shadow over the ideal lives we would like to have. Our inability to confront our problems leads us to follow the lives of characters in books and stories whose flaws are apparent to us – characters who struggle valiantly against or fall miserably to the challenges they face. From the epic *Beowulf*, where the god-like hero Beowulf fights glorious battles, to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, where common folk embark on a pilgrimage, we are fascinated by the exposure of the characters' flaws and vulnerabilities. This disclosure, shared by both stories of humans with unimaginable abilities and smarts and those of characters that are as ordinary as ourselves, allows us to indulge in self-assurance in the midst of our lives' own difficulties. Though we initially read stories of these seemingly different personalities for their characteristic qualities, our underlying motive is our desire for self-assurance in the midst of our lives' own difficulties.

With *Beowulf* we are first attracted to the eponymous protagonist by the exciting life that comes with his greatness. We are swept away by his overwhelming supremacy; he is the “mightiest man on earth” (Heaney 197). The epitome of a hero, Beowulf has strength, intelligence, honor, charisma, and an outstanding repertoire of success which defines him. The

wonders of his superhuman clout are amazing, and we are enthralled by his ability to shake the world by its collar for he is so uniquely powerful that there exists “no one else like him alive” (196). More importantly, we love Beowulf’s selflessness and decisiveness. Despite acknowledging the dangers of his voluntary adventure, he “announced his plan” to aid the king (199), offering his “whole-hearted help and counsel” (278) without demanding payment in return. For the readers who are mere humans, larger-than-life characters like Beowulf who act on their own volition are amazing.

While the might of great figures is gripping, the allure of more familiar characters like those of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is comforting. We as readers find these people relatable. We love the quaintness of the seemingly innocent and very ordinary characters of *The Canterbury Tales*, who together form a group of individuals of varying social class and occupation on a pilgrimage. Even the noblest personality of the assembly, the Knight, is “modest as a maid” (Chaucer 71). He is recognized and loved, for “though so much distinguished, he was wise” (70). The contrast between his maid-like modesty and intelligence and nobleness humanize the Knight, allowing us to better connect with him. The Friar too is close at heart with the readers. Despite being a beggar, he painted as a “festive fellow” (213) with “mellow” mannerisms, a very homely character. He charms us for being not unlike ourselves. Reading about the people of *The Canterbury Tales* requires no imagination and we are ultimately moved by them for their identifiable personalities.

Still, we are not drawn to superheroes like Beowulf and ordinary characters such as those of *The Canterbury Tales* simply for their overwhelming greatness and familiarity respectively. Instead, our motive for loving these polar opposite figures is our desire to see the challenges they face that expose their flaws and vulnerabilities. On the one hand, for the powerful characters, we

are most excited by the adversity that cracks their perfectly mighty fronts. In *Beowulf*, the Beowulf's three great battles progressively become harder to conquer, allowing us to question his undefeatable might. We the readers feel a certain sense of security knowing that Beowulf is human. The epic would not be quite as well-loved had Beowulf indeed proven himself to be immortal. On the other hand, we are also moved by the struggles of more commonplace figures. The Pardoner of *The Canterbury Tales* is grotesque in appearance (Chaucer 693-702) seemingly a reflection of his convoluted nature and far from the charismatic image of hero Beowulf. Yet his desire to pay homage at and his more selfish reasons for travelling to Canterbury piques our interest. We are indulging ourselves by observing the flaws of others, watching the figures deal with them to either develop or perish.

While *Beowulf* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* boast personalities that are easily recognized for their greatness or familiarity, some characters in pop culture are memorable for embodying both these traits. High school student Peter Parker of the movie *Spider-Man* is the perfect combination of larger-than-life qualities and incredible intimacy to us. Initially, much like how we react to *The Canterbury Tales*' Knight and the Friar, we are attracted to Peter because he "leads an ordinary life" (*Spider-Man*). However, he possesses "great power" that "comes [with] great responsibility" (*Spider-Man*) much like Beowulf. What truly captivates us is his desperate struggle in balancing his normal and comfortable life and his superhero alter-ego. The strange blend of Peter's tangible closeness as a once normal student yet unreachable separation as the troubled Spider Man from moviegoers and comic readers alike combines the best of both characters larger-than-life and familiar. Like Spider-Man some the most successful and unforgettable characters of today's modern literature and media feature personalities similar to those of *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales*.

As seen through the larger-than-life Beowulf, the common people of *The Canterbury Tales*, and even figures in pop culture, we are initially attracted to the different types of characters by their respective defining qualities. Beowulf impresses with his strength, greatness, and fast-paced life filled with achievements many of us can only emulate. Others like Chaucer's modest Knight and merry Friar are relatable for their familiarity that so reminds us of ourselves. However, it is the superhuman and the ordinary characters' conflicts and their occasional triumphs that we truly find alluring. Ultimately, we persist in reading stories with these personalities for self-indulgence and assurance, watching them struggle to overcome challenges and personal faults. We are reminded of and encouraged to face our own lives' trials.

Work Cited

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