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Janani Comar '11

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Janani Comar

Townsend

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Hero-Haters:

The Modern Cynicism Towards Perfect Heroes

Mark Twain was noted for saying, “If everybody was satisfied with himself there would be no heroes.” The Anglo-Saxon tale of *Beowulf*, translated by Seamus Heaney, used precisely this idea of a hero, a perfect version of themselves, to be the lead in their story. Beowulf was seen as flawless, able to defeat any obstacle that came in his path. His character was one that reflected their hopes of a sort of savior who possessed the refined skills they did not seem to have. In contrast, the modern take on heroes has always found some blemish on the untarnished champion, which is exactly what the producers of the new *Beowulf* film did. The CGI film version of *Beowulf*, directed by Robert Zemeckis and produced in 2007, altered certain aspects of the story, like Beowulf’s boast about his feats and his complex relationship with Grendel’s mother, to better reflect contemporary skepticism towards a stainless hero.

The modern 21st century way of life and thought is tainted by the idea that perfection is impossible to reach. It is impossible and foolish to think that demigods exist. That is not realistic. Society even strives to find a blemish on even the most saint-like people, disbelieving that a single person could be flawless. Television, books, and movies, in turn, use this societal mindset when creating their works; they portray the protagonists of their stories as good, but always with inherent problems.

On the other hand, the Anglo-Saxon period was similar to camping in the forest with a scarce amount of supplies. Food is scarce, safety is at risk, and formal education and literacy

become irrelevant. In the midst of these dark deficiencies, one could do nothing but hope for some light to be shed. Thus, the story of Beowulf was created.

In the original *Beowulf*, the audience was given a clear picture of a valiant, puissant protagonist to idolize very early in the story. They heard his boast of “awesome strength” (Heaney, 418), his triumphs where he “battled and bound five beasts” (Heaney 420), and his courageous proclamation to kill Grendel or to die trying. None but Unferth dared to even dream to question the might or abilities of which he claimed. During the celebration feast, Unferth raised his doubts about Beowulf retelling the story of how Beowulf had lost his bet with Breca in a swimming match. Unferth claimed he would not be able to match up to Grendel, saying to Beowulf that “...this time you’ll [Beowulf] be worsened; no one has ever/ outlasted an entire night against Grendel.” (Heaney 527-528) Beowulf calmly retold the tale of Breca, saying that “Time and again, foul things attacked me,/ lurking and stalking,” (Heaney 559-560), which was why he lost the race. By playing off the fight so nonchalantly, he reinforced his image as a flawless hero and reduced Unferth to nothing but a mere jealous man.

The modern, twenty-first century *Bewoulf* told this scene in a slightly different way. The filmmakers kept the same setting, with Beowulf boasting of his deeds, then feasting with the Geats while Unferth raised his objections. In this version, Beowulf answers Unferth in the exact same way with the exact same lines as the original, but the directors make use of their creative licenses by modifying the interpretation slightly. They made it seem as though Beowulf had been exaggerating his great fight during the race because, in reality, he had some ‘business’ with a very attractive mermaid. (Zemeckis)

The modern version rejected the notion that Bewoulf could have superhuman-like powers, above the common people. Although he remains a hero in both stories, the contemporary

film seeks bring down and sort of equalize Beowulf with the common people. Society today lies within a foundation of equality; no person is better than the other. Everyone has their merits, and everyone has their flaws. This egalitarian notion is then carried out into the idea that heroes cannot be better than the common folk and therefore must have some fault.

Another example of a change made by the directors was Beowulf's relationship with Grendel's mother. Beowulf had initially come to Heorot to save the Geats from Grendel. After he successfully slayed Grendel, he was attacked by Grendel's mother, who was infuriated by the killing of her son (Heaney 1492-1550). The people once again turned to Beowulf as their hero to take care of this small problem. In the original tale, Beowulf went to her lair and, with all his courage and might, finished her off much in the same way he killed her son. He brought Grendel's head back on a spear to the hall as a token of his triumph. He proclaimed to the crowd, "Never need you fear for a single thane of your sept or nation,/ young warriors or old, that laying waste of life that you and your people endured of yore." (Heaney 1673-1676).

The movie, however, took the same scene, but gave it a new spin. Beowulf still killed Grendel much in the same way and promises to exterminate his mother when she retaliates. But when he went to her lair, instead of finishing her off right away, he found something he did not think he would, a beautiful creature. Beowulf, who cannot seem to overcome her great power, is seduced by Grendel's mother and impregnated her with what will be a dragon. Beowulf returned to Heorot claiming victory over her and brought back her golden cup as a symbol of his victory. In reality, Beowulf not only failed to kill Grendel's mother, but also complicated his life by adding in this love affair with a monster (Zemeckis).

A theme of sexual temptation and fallibility in the film *Beowulf* is indicative of our modern sensibilities. From a biological viewpoint, Beowulf's behavior was very natural. Humans

are sexual creatures that seek to fulfill their desires, which in turn will continue the human species. Beowulf was merely keeping in touch with his natural side. Modern society would want to see this action as a sort of indication that Beowulf is human so, unlike the book, he is given an intellectual, courageous half and a more natural, instinctual half. A story without a protagonist having any sexual desires would be unlikely, and thus unrealistic.

Both instances of alterations made by in the film exemplify the modern feeling towards heroes. The general feeling today is that no one, no matter how God-like, is perfect. Beowulf was portrayed in the original tale as a fearless, almost superhuman that could obliterate any obstacle that came in his path. The twenty-first century is unable to just take this at face value. They took the extra step of making Beowulf like a common person with a complex personality and natural desires, believing that this makes it more realistic. It is this aspect of realism that is very unique to the modern era. Everything has to be reasonable and relatable to everyday life. The filmmakers took this fiction story and did their best to turn it into 'realistic' fiction. Beowulf couldn't possibly be this superhuman who lost a race because he was busy fighting off a demon; there had to be another story behind it. Beowulf couldn't possibly have killed three monsters and ended the story as a great hero; he needed to be a human at some point. The CGI film can be taken as a reflection of our society today, one that cannot help but find the flaws in everyone to bring in a sense of reality to the whole picture.

Works Cited

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