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Bravery, Honor, and Loyalty as Morals in *Beowulf*

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“Bravery, Honor, and Loyalty as Morals in *Beowulf*”

Since it originated in oral tradition, the epic *Beowulf* has no known author. It does, however, serve as a representation of the Anglo-Saxon culture it originates from. As a work of art, it also serves its purpose of moral instruction, today serving as a demonstration of what values were important to the Anglo-Saxon people. Especially seen through the characters of Beowulf and Wiglaf, the poem *Beowulf* illustrates three important morals of its time: bravery, honor, and loyalty.

Beowulf, the hero of the poem, exhibits great bravery in everything he does. Before facing Grendel, Beowulf “took off the helmet and handed his attendant / the patterned sword” (672-673), deciding that using a weapon or protection of any kind would make the battle too easy. Shortly after doing this, he boasts, “When it comes to fighting, I count myself / as dangerous any day as Grendel” (677-678). Reckless and impressive actions like these demonstrate Beowulf’s courage and daring and make him appear more heroic. Over fifty years later, Beowulf shows the same qualities when fighting the dragon, as does Wiglaf, who aids him and does not stop even as “flames lapped the shield, / charred it to the boss, and the body armor / on the young warrior was useless to him” (2672-2674). Neither man could be deterred by lack of defense because both demonstrated heroic bravery.

As the story’s great and glorified hero, Beowulf also demonstrates honor. When he throws away his armor and sword before leaving for his fight with Grendel, he explains that his opponent “has no idea the arts of war, / or shield or swordplay” (681-682). He therefore decides that there will be “no weapons, therefore, / for either this night” (683-684). In accordance

with the morals of the time, a kill does not bring satisfaction unless it is fair. Meanwhile, Grendel, the poem's malevolent villain, displays a lack of honor when the epic states, "he grabbed thirty men / from their resting places" (122-123). The act of attacking men in their sleep when they cannot defend themselves shows how morally inferior Grendel is to the honorable Beowulf. Wiglaf later shows honor in his own way when he refuses to withdraw in battle, saying, "A warrior will sooner / die than live a life of shame" (2890-2891). Retreating would be shameful and therefore dishonorable, which is not acceptable to a good man like Wiglaf. Many of his fellow soldiers, however, did just that, and at Beowulf's funeral, Wiglaf pointed out their lack of honor with contempt, saying, "I would rather my body were robed in the same / burning blaze as my gold-giver's body / than go back home bearing arms" (2651-2653). Here, Wiglaf proves himself the better man because he has honor while the others, who willingly abandoned their King in battle, clearly do not.

Lastly, Beowulf and Wiglaf both show outstanding loyalty throughout the piece. All of Beowulf's actions are clearly motivated by loyalty, starting with his decision to help the Danes. Beowulf's father once started a feud, which Hrothgar helped to end. Hrothgar recalls, "Ecgtheow acknowledged me with oaths of allegiance" (472). Beowulf traveled with his men to fight a fearsome monster not for the glory of it but so that he could help his father to repay his debt. Many years later, Wiglaf shows his loyalty and devotion to his king Beowulf by following him into the fray when no one else did, promising, "I shall stand by you" (2668). In the end, this loyalty reveals Wiglaf's valor, proving him to be just as heroic a character as Beowulf.

The characters in *Beowulf* demonstrate three of the most important morals at the time of the story's creation: bravery, honor, and loyalty. The character of Beowulf clearly exemplifies these traits, but Wiglaf, a comparably small character, does so just as well. In the end, his morals

save the day when he shows all three at once by jumping to Beowulf's aid while fighting the dragon. Together, these men form a representation of the moral ideal in early Anglo-Saxon culture.