Comparing Chivalry In Sir Gawain And The Green Knight And Beowulf Essay, Research Paper

Back in early literature there were two great epic poems that became the fundamental format for future works. These two poems are called Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Beowulf. Even though we do not know the original authors of the works, we do know that these two stories were passed from one generation to the next for hundreds of years before they were finally written down on paper. They represented many social qualities such as the battle between good and evil, courage, mental and physical strength, heroism, and honor. The eighth century, when Beowulf was written, truly depicts literature at this time of chivalry of a knight to the fullest. However, Sir Gawain, written in the 14 century, depicts the literature at that time, when knights were not upholding chivalry.

To understand the poems more fully, modern readers need to understand the complexity of chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Chivalric behavior in the sense of a knight can be defined as having courtesy, gallantry, and honor. The practice of chivalry forms the basis of gentlemanly conduct for the Middle Ages. Sir Gawain, written in the 14th century, definitely does not practice perfect chivalric conduct throughout the poem.

At Camelot, in the first part of the poem, chivalry appears as a social code defining the aristocracy. When the Green Knights demands a challenge, not one member of King Arthur s court steps up. Only until King Arthur says that he will do it does Sir Gawain step up. He accepts the challenge as King Arthur s nephew, a representative of the court. His actions uphold the reputation that the court has established. Sir Gawain made the promise to the Green Knight that he would return to the Green Castle in one year for the Green Knight to return the challenge.

In the second part of the poem a change of mood is presented also with a new view of the hero (Sir Gawain). When Sir Gawain arrived at a castle, he was introduced to a lord and his lady. The lord welcomed the knight with open arms and said that whatever he hunted, he would give to Sir Gawain at the end of the day, and whatever Sir Gawain got, he had to give to the lord. While the lord was out hunting, his wife came onto Sir Gawain. The first day, she gave him a kiss, so Sir Gawain had to kiss the lord. The second day came two kisses. The final day, the wife gave Sir Gawain a girdle and three kisses. However, at the end of the day, Sir Gawain broke his promise to the lord and only gave him three kisses, no girdle.

When Sir Gawain got to the Green Castle, the Green Knight went to strike him over the head and Sir Gawain flinched twice. The third time the Green Knight broke the skin, but surprised Sir Gawain by stating that he knew about his broken promise to the lord. Sir Gawain was set up by the Green Knight s challenge, as the lord was the Green Knight and it was the Green Knight s wife. Upon returning to King Arthur s court, Sir Gawain was embarrassed at his mistake and had to wear the green girdle as a reminder that he did not uphold chivalry.

The epic poem Beowulf described the most heroic man of the Anglo-Saxon times. The hero, Beowulf, was a seemingly invincible person with all the extraordinary traits required of a hero. He was able to use his super-human physical strength and courage to put his people before himself. He encountered hideous monsters and the most ferocious of beasts but he never fears the threat of death. His leadership skills were superb and he is even able to boast about all his achievements. Beowulf was the ultimate epic hero who risked his life countless times for immortal glory and for the good of others.

Beowulf was a hero in the eyes of his fellow men through his amazing physical strength. He fought in numerous battles and returned victorious from all but his last. In his argument with Unferth, Beowulf explained the reason he “lost” a simple swimming match with his youthful opponent Brecca. Not only had Beowulf been swimming for seven nights, he had also stopped to kill nine sea creatures in the depths of the ocean. Beowulf was also strong enough to kill the monster Grendel, who had been terrorizing the Danes for twelve years, with his bare hands by ripping off his arm. When Beowulf was fighting Grendel’s mother, who was seeking revenge on her son’s death, he was able to slay her by slashing the monster’s neck with a Giant’s sword that could only be lifted by a person as strong as Beowulf. When he chopped off her head, he carried it from the ocean with ease, but it took four men to lift and carry it back to Heorot mead-hall. This strength was a key trait of Beowulf’s heroism.

Another heroic trait of Beowulf was his ability to put his peoples welfare before his own. Beowulf’s uncle was king of the Geats so he was sent as an emissary to help rid the Danes of the evil Grendel. Beowulf risked his own life for the Danes, asking help from no one. He realized the dangers but feared nothing for his own life. After Beowulf had served his people as King of the Geats for fifty years, he went to battle one last time to fight a horrible dragon who was frightening all of his people. Beowulf was old and tired but he defeated the dragon in order to protect his people. Even in death he wished so secure safety for the Geats so a tall lighthouse was built in order to help the people find there way back from sea.

The most heroic of traits within Beowulf was that he was not afraid to die. He always explained his death wishes before going into battle and requested to have any assets delivered to his people. “But if battle should claim me, send this most excellent coat of mail to Hygelac, this best of corslets that protects my breast; it once belonged to Hrethel, the work of Weland. Fate goes ever as it must, (40). He was aware of the heroic paradox; he will be glorified in life or death for his actions. He knew that when he fought an enemy like Grendel or Grendel’s mother he would achieve immortality as the victor or the loser. “When I put to sea, sailed through the breakers with my bad of men, I resolved to fulfill the desire of your people, or suffer the pangs of death, caught fast in Grendel s clutches. Here, in Heorot, I shall either work a deed of great daring, or lay down my life, (43-44). Even with the enormous amount of confidence Beowulf possessed, he understood that fate would work its magic no matter what and he could be killed at any point in his life. He faced reality by showing no fear and prepared for a positive or a fatal outcome.

Beowulf was the prime example of an epic hero. His bravery and strength surpassed all mortal men; loyalty and the ability to think of himself last made him revered by all. Beowulf came openly and wholeheartedly to help the Danes which was an unusual occurrence in a time of war and widespread fear. He set a noble example for all human beings relaying the necessity of brotherhood and friendship. Beowulf is most definitely an epic hero of epic proportions.

Both Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Beowulf depicted the literature of the centuries they were written in. Although Sir Gawain was a knight of King Arthur s court, he was by no means the perfect knight. He did not uphold chivalry as he should have by breaking promises and giving into temptation. Beowulf, on the other hand, was the epitome of what a perfect knight was all about. He was brave and would risk his life to help others.

38a