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There and Back Again: The Epic Hero's Journey Through Gift-Giving

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Beowulf and *The Hobbit* are two pieces of literature that the average high school student will have some familiarity with, whether from actual experience or cultural notoriety – the latter especially being popularized by Peter Jackson’s film franchise, the 2001-2003 *The Lord of the Rings* and the more recent 2012-2014 *The Hobbit*. With this resurgence, it has become somewhat more common knowledge that Tolkien was a *Beowulf* scholar and that he is responsible for a major piece of criticism, “The Monsters and the Critics,” that spurred literary interest in the text. However, few comparisons have been made between the gift-giving culture present in both tales and the stories’ own possible use as ethical guidance by the authors. In a culture based on tribal living, the idea of camaraderie between warriors and tribal leaders and their people becomes a necessity, and in Anglo-Saxon society, formal gift-giving reinforced this idea. The positive outcomes of this cultural tradition can also be seen in medieval literature as a means of reinforcing the concept to its audience, and *Beowulf* is no exception. In both *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*, the cultural ideal of material and immaterial gift-giving facilitates brotherhood between the men of the society, demonstrates the consequences of ignoring gift-giving, and illustrates its rewards when performed.

To truly understand gift-giving, a basic understanding of Anglo-Saxon history and the culture’s concept of gift-giving is necessary. While little is definitively known about Britain before 500 BC, it is well-known that the Insular Celts – that is, the Celtic people of the British Isles – migrated to Britain and Ireland from continental Europe. During the first century, the Romans invaded England, created an administrative infrastructure, and spread Christianity. However, according to historian C. Warren Hollister, England experienced a variety of encounters with three specific peoples – the Angles, the Saxons,

and the Jutes – and these encounters varied between organized invasions by small groups of mercenaries and peaceful experiences that evolved into amicable settlements (Hollister 20). Though the Britons pleaded for assistance with defense against the more vicious invading Anglo-Saxons, the invading tribes succeeded in their mission to conquer the Britons (Hollister 21-2). Through this process, the Roman-Briton culture was successfully supplanted by the Anglo-Saxon culture of the Germanic tribes.

The Anglo-Saxon period seems to have lasted from roughly 410-1066, and many extreme changes occurred during this time (British Broadcasting Corporation 2014). While the Roman-ruled Britain had been densely populated and urbanized, the Germanic people remained particularly rural, and they traded the rigorous Roman governmental system for a looser grouping of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Hollister 23). The warrior-band culture of the Anglo-Saxon tribal society organized around the male leader, as opposed to the state, and these tribes were distinctly warlike, finding it more desirable to take what they needed by force (Hollister 18). The Germanic people were also polytheistic, worshipping multiple gods and goddesses, as well as largely illiterate, passing their stories along through oral tradition (Hollister 18). Their economy was more rudimentary than its Romanic predecessor, and was based almost exclusively on bartering – and, more specifically, gift-giving.

The culture of the Anglo-Saxon people rested almost completely on the gift-giving system, as this system worked in place of the typical economic arrangement of most modern societies. In his article “The mead hall community,” English historian Stephen Pollington states that this practice was strongly linked with the idea of family and community, and was also of the utmost importance since “legal and social status was

shaped and defined by membership of a network of overlapping familial relationships,” (21). Pollington asserts that this desire for reciprocity and community can be seen in the archaeological and literary evidence of the Anglo-Saxon mead halls: these halls were the center point of the communities, where warriors would celebrate victories together, lords would welcome and give tribute to their guests, and reward their warriors with food and drink. Mead halls served as a place to be merry and escape the trials that they had experienced in their previous battles. Gift-giving, while a complex act of cultural reciprocity, also involves another sort of contract called the pledge. Marcel Mauss, a French sociologist and anthropologist, suggests a magical sanction associated with this pledge, although he also states that the pledge “creates obligations and acts as a binding force [and] also engages the honor, authority, and *mana* of the man who hands it over” (61).

To the untrained eye, gift-giving may seem to be a simple idea of reciprocity and good will. While that is so, gift-giving was also a complex cultural norm meant to connect the community to each other, and the repercussions of ignoring this status quo were considerable. The punishment for disregarding these cultural laws could be banishment or social exile. The Anglo-Saxon culture had a very strict belief that magic populated their world. If their peers did not punish a criminal, the people believed that the magical force that threaded itself through their world would certainly punish those who did not administer said punishment.

To bolster this assertion, Mauss notes that the word gift has two definitions in the Anglo-Saxon language. One definition is still in use today – a gift is something granted in recognition or repayment. However, there is also a definition of the word that translates

more closely to “poison.” Mauss asserts that this dichotomy of definitions shows the danger of the gift and pledge, and the danger of ignoring reciprocity or one’s moral obligations. By inserting gift-giving rewards and punishments into their literature and spreading it through communities by oral tradition, the Anglo-Saxons reinforced their cultural ideals in a way that regulated the people in the absence of an elaborate government such as the Romans had instated. These norms spread through their literature to reaffirm for the people of these remote communities that the best way to seek rewards is to gift-give, thereby helping both pledger and pledged in the same moment.

Thus, while it must be noted that the Anglo-Saxons were known for being incredibly violent people, it is also important to return to Pollington’s concept of the mead hall, of which the primary focus was to foster community. While the Anglo-Saxons are and were known for their vicious war tactics, the idea of kindred and family remained extremely important to them. While gift-giving did seem to have a “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” mentality, in its most optimistic sense, it was also seen as a way to look after one’s fellows and inspire fraternity among the people.

Since gift-giving was a huge part of the culture, it plays a substantial part in the epic poem *Beowulf*. The purpose of the epic poem is to tell the tales of the hero embarking on glorious exploits. Such heroes have much to live up to, and farther to fall if they fail, and because the heroic protagonist is capable of great things, his death at the end is more tragic than it would have been had the readers not held him to the heroic standards. While *Beowulf* itself does fit in with the basic criterion for the Greek and Roman epic poem because it is a long narrative celebrating heroic deeds, it seems to take aspects of the Greco-Roman literature and format them to specifically reflect the Anglo-

Saxon ideals. This difference can be seen from the beginning of *Beowulf*. Rather than calling upon the muses for inspiration as a Greek poet may do, the beginning of this narrative gives historical background and pays tribute to Hrothgar's ancestors and how he came to the throne, particularly fitting considering the Anglo-Saxon esteem of community and family.

As the narrator discusses the demon Grendel and the havoc he has wreaked upon Hrothgar's people, in light of the culture's importance of family, the reader can recognize how heinous Grendel's actions truly would have been to the epic's original audience. The fact that the warriors and people are slaughtered in a mead hall, a place of camaraderie and celebration and the primary home of gift-giving, makes the situation even graver than it would ordinarily be in any other culture. Perhaps Grendel is aware of how the setting of his villainous actions would be perceived, as this is a group that has esteemed community and is therefore fearful of outsiders. Through this portrayal of Grendel as an outsider, *Beowulf* leaves readers unaware of the monster's actual appearance; in an allegorical sense, he perhaps represents abstract evil. Thus, true evil for this community would be an outsider butchering members of the community on the threshold of their communal area.

It is in the scene where Beowulf arrives in Hrothgar's kingdom that the reader sees the first example of gift-giving and the pledge. On his arrival Beowulf offers his services to Hrothgar. He mentions the tragedy of the empty mead hall, saying, "Seafarers say how stands this hall, / of buildings best, for your band of thanes / empty and idle, when evening sun / in the harbor of heaven is hidden away" (ll. 411-14). Hrothgar returns the favor, as he has done with all warriors that have come to fight for him (and perished as a result), by giving him food, drink, and having minstrels celebrate and serenade the

newcomers. After Beowulf's daring defeat of Grendel, he hangs the monster's dismembered arm to the mead hall's wall, and the minstrels return and continue to sing of Beowulf's great deeds and compare his story to various other heroes in their canon. Hrothgar also gives Beowulf plenteous gifts, as the narrator says,

“To Beowulf gave the bairn of Healfdene
a gold-wove banner, guerdon of triumph,
broidered battle-flag, breastplate and helmet;
and a splendid sword was seen of many
borne to the brave one. Beowulf took
cup in hall: for such costly gifts
he suffered no shame in that soldier throng” (ll. 1020-26).

This passage illustrates many aspects of the culture's gift-giving tradition. Since Beowulf has held up his end of the pledge, Hrothgar offers him and his fellow Geatish warriors beautiful and extravagant gifts, and Beowulf receives them with no humbleness since to him, these are gifts that are rightly earned. Instead, this is the staple of reciprocity: because the contract has been fulfilled, “Heorot now / was filled with friends,” and the narrator states that the king behaved honorably (ll. 1017-18).

However, not only is Beowulf given these wonderful material goods: there is also an elaborate exchange of words. Professor of Medieval and Renaissance studies Robert E. Bjork argues that with each instance of gift-giving in this first section, an elaborate speech always accompanies the action. Although little attention has been paid to this aspect of the poem, Bjork believes that it is possibly the most important part, stating that, “I contend, however, that the gift-based nature of Anglo-Saxon society is what largely

accounts for the prominence of speech in Old English narrative poems such as *Beowulf* (39 percent)” (995). That is nearly one third of the poem, and one must consider that this must be a more important part of the poem rather than merely dialogue. Following this train of thought, Bjork asserts that:

“that ‘mesh of obligations’ consists of three related strands: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate, the last being the most important of all. Only through reciprocal exchange can one solidify alliances and friendships within and between groups,” (Bjork 994-5).

While obligation has been discussed in terms of giving the gift of material goods, it has not been discussed in terms of the giving of a speech as a gift, which Bjork sees as a major factor in this first section of *Beowulf*. Ample speech accompanies both when a contract is initiated and finished, particularly with the boast. This can be seen when *Beowulf* first arrives and brags of his heroic duties and capabilities, and again when another contract is begun when Grendel’s mother terrorizes Heorot. When the latter contract commences Hrothgar tells the story of Grendel, but finishes by telling *Beowulf*, “I will reward thee, for waging this fight / with ancient treasure, as I erst did,” and each time *Beowulf* accepts a pledge, he crows of his past heroics (ll. 1380-81).

Bjork argues that without these speeches when accepting and finishing a contract, gift-giving would essentially be worthless. In a culture based on oral tradition, merely accepting a gift without the thankfulness, or in fact the boast (in a culture where valor is valued on par with community), would be extremely offensive. The reciprocity of words fosters camaraderie between he who is speaking and who is returning that speech.

Following Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother, there is again a plethora of speeches and gift exchanges of words, including the story of the former king Heremod, who is presented as a contrast to Beowulf. Heremod was a king who, "his breast-hoard, grew, no bracelets gave he / to Danes as was due" (ll. 1719-20). Heremod's unwillingness to gift-give to his fellow Danes showed not only his greediness but the lack of priority he put in the brotherhood of his fellow royalty, both values which are extremely important to Anglo-Saxon peoples, and by ignoring them he is now a villain in their history. Hrothgar offers this story as a warning to Beowulf to not become this sort of ruler, to always choose eternal rewards over earthly ones, and should he do this, he will be a wise and good ruler. The irony of this situation must be noted; as directly preceding Hrothgar's speech which he condemns material goods, he has just lavished Beowulf and his people with very elaborate earthly gifts. After this exchange of words and treasures, Hrothgar, Beowulf, and the people sleep in peace, and Beowulf and his comrades leave for their homeland.

When Beowulf returns home, he has now become the primary gift giver, as was Hrothgar in the first and second parts of this poem. He comes home and re-tells the stories of his heroic deeds at Heorot, which brings him back into favor with his kinsman who remained behind. Beowulf displays the gifts that Hrothgar gave to him, proclaiming the distant king to be a good and wise ruler because "So held this king to the customs old" (l. 2144). As Beowulf's warriors are showing the gifts to Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle and ruler of Geatland, he offers all of the gifts to Hygelac and proclaims that "Thy grace alone / can find me favor. Few indeed / have I of kinsmen, save, Hygelac, thee" (ll. 2149-51). Years later Hygelac dies in battle, and his heir, Heardred, is unable to protect the

Geatish people. Thus, Beowulf becomes king even though he is only Hygelac's nephew and previously had not been seriously considered for the throne.

However, Michael C. Drout discusses the system of inheritance by blood versus by heroic deeds as a potential form of gift-giving. While Beowulf may not originally have been in favor with the Geatish people, his ability to graciously give gifts to his people signals his ability to be a true leader. Here Drout explains, "Beowulf gives Hrothgar's gifts of dynastic heirlooms to Hygelac, thus demonstrating his continued allegiance to the Geatish house, and Hygelac in turn rewards Beowulf for this gesture" (215). While Beowulf is related to Hygelac by blood, it is by his deeds that he inherits the throne, thereby reinforcing the aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture that should be acted upon on a day-to-day basis. This poem shows the rewards that will be given if the people abide by these cultural laws.

In the final thousand or so lines, Geatland faces its own trials and troubles after fifty years of Beowulf ruling as a noble leader. A thief stumbles upon the horde of the dragon and in his fright takes a goblet and runs away with it, which results in the dragon going on a rampage and demolishing nearly all of Beowulf's beloved home. The narrator tells the story of an ancient lord who buried the treasures many years before after all of the members of his clan had died. He was miserable having only the treasure to keep him company and asked the earth to, "[ward] the treasure, his one delight, / though brief his respite" (ll. 2240-41). Returning to Beowulf's narrative, Beowulf takes eleven other men to find the burglar and fight the dragon. What is peculiar about the presence of gold in this section is that, previously, it had been a sign of gift-giving and generosity. However, it has now become a sign of greed, as is demonstrated by the darker tone of this section.

The stories of the epic's protagonists have not progressed smoothly: Hygelac is dead, as is his son, and their land now lies in ruins. Death and mourning are the prevailing tones of this section. This portion displays the negative side of the love of gold, and reflects the story of Heremod. Heremod was at a disadvantage since his clan was obliterated and he was unable to gift-give. However, by showing Heremod choosing to bury the treasure under the ground so that the earth could protect, the epic seems to imply that if he and his people were still alive he would still have that same mentality of hoarding the gold. In earlier sections, the treasure has never been described as something to protect, but something to give in thanks for their people being protected. This lord seems to lack fraternity both by circumstances and his own personal beliefs.

Beowulf is struck down by a venomous bite of a dragon to the neck after his men, save one named Wiglaf, abandon him. As he is dying, Beowulf begs Wiglaf to show him the treasure and proclaims that he is glad to be able to trade his life for it, declaring to Wiglaf, "Thou art end and remnant of all our race / the Waegmunding name," and giving Wiglaf his armor, necklace, and ring (ll. 2813-14). However, as the people come to see his body, they see that the pile of armor and cups next to him are rusty and decayed. Wiglaf rebukes the men for their cowardice and claims that Beowulf's generosity was wasted on them. The cost of their cowardice will be great: the news of Beowulf's death will surely bring war from foreign lords upon them. Beowulf is buried with the treasure according to his final wishes, and the poem ends as it began - with the funeral of a warrior.

However, Beowulf is repeating the actions of that ancient lord and does not prescribe to the ideal of gift-giving. Why is this? Perhaps his refusal to gift-give serves as

punishment to those who ignored the ideal of brotherhood. In Anglo-Saxon culture, one is not possible without the other, and Beowulf makes the final choice that if they will not act as brothers, they will not receive their gifts. The ending of this poem serves as a warning to those hearing it: dismissal of brotherhood results in the death of a great leader and earns the denial of gifts. To the people who would be listening to this poem, these are two cultural staples that would serve as a great loss.

Gift-giving and brotherhood are two principals in *The Hobbit* as well, although it is no secret that Tolkien was extremely influenced by *Beowulf* while writing his fantasy epic. Professor Marjorie Burns states that while Tolkien likes to create characters that clearly fit within the good or evil archetype, he never exclusively chooses one culture (modern or ancient) over the other, instead picking and choosing ideals he esteems from each. This criterion of selection shows that he values both the selfless aspect of gift-giving and the concept of brotherhood. The story's journey is Bilbo's, and he begins as someone that Tolkien might not admire.

When the dwarves first arrive on Bilbo's doorstep, for instance, he is against welcoming them into his house, and only at the urging of Gandalf does he grudgingly grant them food and rest. Even then, though, Bilbo is still not a gracious host: all the while, "he was getting very hot, and red in the face, and annoyed: 'Confusticate and bebother these dwarves'" (19). He then joins them on their journey, entering a contract that states that he will be given one fourteenth of the treasure after he has successfully helped the dwarves overcome the dragon guarding their homeland of Erebor as the company's burglar.

However, as their quest progresses, he and the dwarves do not get along particularly well as the dwarves believe that Bilbo has not held up his side of the contract; he has not performed the heroic deeds that he was hired for. Nonetheless, there is a turning point in their relationship after Bilbo's fateful battle of wits with Gollum and the dwarves run-in with the goblins; he is separated from the dwarves for some time, and when he finds them again, Bilbo overhears the dwarves scorning him, claiming that he has been more trouble than good thus far. When Bilbo reveals himself to them, they are shocked and fervently question him about how he managed to get past the goblins and what happened to him while he was gone. Bilbo obliges by telling them about one of the first heroic exploits he has had on the journey. After this, the dwarves find a new respect for him, honoring him as one of the members of the company and are ready and willing to ask for his opinions and contributions to the group as he has finally begun to fulfill his job as burglar on their quest.

Speech as a gift is also present in *The Hobbit*, as can be found in the scene after the eagles rescue the company after being chased by the goblins and wargs:

“‘Farewell!’ they cried, ‘wherever you fare, til your eyries receive you at the journey’s end!’ That is the polite thing to say among eagles.

‘May the wind under your wings bear you where the sun sails and the moon walks,’ answered Gandalf, who knew the correct reply” (101).

The eagles supply a way for the dwarves to thank them and expect the correct response to show that they are thankful for being rescued. Thankfully, Gandalf is present, since the

dwarves clearly are not aware of the appropriate reply and run the risk of offending the eagles after their kindness.

Finally, the tragic end of Thorin Oakenshield can be seen as a result of his inability to gift-give. After the dragon has been disposed of by Bard following its decimation of the city of Lake Town, Bard turns to the dwarves who have barricaded themselves inside the Lonely Mountain with their long-lost treasure and asks for a fraction of the gold as remuneration for killing the dragon and as a means of rebuilding Laketown. Thorin adamantly refuses their request, and when they ask again, he responds by shooting arrows and threatening the group. This leads the dwarves, the people of Laketown, and the human's allies the Elves, all to the brink of war. The goblins make their way towards these three groups to annihilate them, and at the very last minute the unlikely alliance of dwarves, elves, and humans rally together and defeat the goblins. Near the end of this battle, Thorin is dealt a fatal blow, as are his nephews and subsequent heirs, Fili and Kili, resulting in the end of the line of Durin just when they had reclaimed their homeland. These deaths can be seen as punishment for Thorin's inability to gift give to those who assisted him, and the result is not only his death but also the death of his royal line.

Bilbo, on the other hand, has grown as a character, and more specifically as a hobbit, member of a race that is known for being somewhat selfish and hoarding things in their hobbit holes. He is granted his share of the treasure by the remaining dwarves and they part as brothers, with Bilbo insisting, "'If ever you are passing my way' said Bilbo, 'don't wait to knock! Tea is at four; but any of you are welcome at any time!'" (246). This is a great change from the disgruntled hobbit at the start of his journey, and as he

makes his way back to the Shire, he deals out his portion of the treasure to Bard, Dain, the new king of the dwarves, and Lord Elrond of Rivendell, all in thanks and reparation to help those who were affected by evil to rebuild. When he finally returns home, he is accounted a rich hobbit due to the remains of that portion of the treasure he received as payment for his service – in spite of his earlier giving most of it away. Tolkien shows the values of gift-giving and rewards his protagonist by giving him camaraderie throughout the world of Middle Earth at the end of his journey, and he attempts to apply these values to modern literature.

Beowulf has become a staple of epic poetry as *The Hobbit* has for the fantasy genre, with Tolkien having a great impact on both forms of literature. Tolkien takes the values of Anglo-Saxon culture and applies them to his own novel, resulting in a deep and meaningful character progression for Bilbo Baggins whose journey mirrors that of other epic poetry heroes. This idea of reciprocity is a cultural concept that has roots back to Anglo-Saxon history which was re-invigorated in 1937 by Tolkien, and is now a concept that is being presented to our masses through the rising popularity of Tolkien's works.

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