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# The Eternal Hero: A Study of the Evolution of the Literary Character Throughout History

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The Eternal Hero:

A Study of the Evolution of the Literary Character Throughout History

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3/12/17

Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation with Distinction

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## Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	iii
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Ancient</b> .....	3
Gilgamesh.....	4
Achilles.....	7
Rama.....	10
<b>Medieval</b> .....	14
Beowulf.....	15
Rostam.....	18
Kriemhilde.....	21
<b>Early Modern</b> .....	25
Eliza Bennet.....	26
The Monster.....	30
Natty Bumppo.....	33
<b>Modern</b> .....	37
Conan the Barbarian.....	38
Sethe.....	41
Harry Potter.....	44
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	49
<b>Story</b> .....	53
<b>Works' Cited</b> .....	69

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## Introduction

“The hero is the man of self-achieved submission.”

Joseph Campbell<sup>1</sup>

If you take a trip to the caves in Lascaux, France, you would see beautiful paintings of prehistoric creatures, dating back millennia.<sup>2</sup> It is easy to forget that humans always had concepts like art and literature. But drawn exquisitely on these walls is the living proof that they did exist, if only in ways that we do not quite understand.

If you look closer, you will see images of ancient bulls, called aurochs, prehistoric horses, and even woolly rhinos. But there is something else apparent in these paintings. It is the presence of Man. Many of the paintings depict hunters, armed with crude weapons such as spears and bows, charging after the massively drawn animals, some of whom appear to be able to crush them with one foot. Some even have animal features, like heads that resemble those of birds.

Are these ancient people trying to tell a story? Perhaps record a day's hunting trip the way a modern person would write about his day in a journal? These questions will probably never have answers. But one thing is for sure. The paintings exist as evidence of humanity's endless store of creativity, and the drive to tell their stories through their words (or lack of, in the case of paintings).

As far back as 15,000 BC, there is evidence of literature. The written word has always existed in one form or another. The varied people of the world have since the dawn of humanity attempted to convey their feelings and beliefs in a way that other people, in context, could understand them. Literature exists as a window to the human mind, an experiment into the ability of humanity to imagine new worlds to tell them more about the world they already think they know. In a way, these stories never die out. They are reborn again and again throughout the history of human civilization. Joseph Campbell wrote,

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Princeton University Press. 2008. Print. Pg. 11

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/lascaux/>

“For the symbols of mythology are not manufactured; they cannot be ordered, invented, or permanently suppressed. They are spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bears within it, undamaged, the germ power of its source.”<sup>3</sup>

Could it really be that the stories we tell each other is what unites us all as members of the same species? That these stories are more than just creative yarns, they stand for greater truths and beliefs that humans have held and debated for as long as we have existed on this earth? Furthermore, is the main character of these stories, the Literary Hero, a vehicle in which humanity has defined itself in various cultures throughout our history? These are good questions. I intend to answer them to the best of my ability. I intend to establish that the Literary Hero is, in one form or another, the greatest way in which mankind has chosen to represent itself, that the Hero is a way that authors, indeed entire cultures, make themselves immortal by recording their values and aspirations in a way that will echo down through the ages.

I will begin by explaining how I intend to measure nearly 5000 years of recorded human achievement. I will specifically discuss the major periods of human history, and perform a critical examination of each era through literary characters that defined it. The periods are: Ancient (3100 BC–500 AD), Medieval (500 AD-1600 AD), Early Modern (1600 AD-1914 AD), and Postmodern (1914-). Each of these periods have their own forms of beliefs and standards, and each can be seen as being shaped by those beliefs and standards. The literature of the times was and is affected by them, and I hope to show how this has happened.

The Literary character has always existed, and I intend to show how he or she has changed the times, and, in turn, been changed by the times. Literature is a powerful force of culture and morality, liberalism and conservatism, engines of fate, and forces of chaos. As each era has its own values, so each character reflects those values (and might even go against some in order to convey the authors’ understanding of them). The characters, if powerful enough, often cause social change, defining major thoughts of various eras. Literature can both define a period, but can also be the force that ends it. As stated above, literature gets at the heart of what humanity is, and serves to tell their views in a way that everyone can hear it. Not every Literary

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<sup>3</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Princeton University Press. 2008. Print. Pg. 2

Hero is an everyman character, but every Literary Hero is symbolic of what his or her writers believes. The Literary Hero is the scale in which humanity weighs itself.

### Ancient (3100 BC-500 AD)

By far the largest of the periods, Ancient literature roughly begins in the Fertile Crescent, culminates with the Greco-Roman Classicists, and ends with the fall of Rome at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. This period is difficult to understand for several reasons. One, it is so far back that historians can only make educated guesses as to what the people back then actually believed and thought. Second, given the aforementioned fact that it is the largest of the periods, the belief systems are, while similar in some categories, very different from each other. Encompassing nearly 4000 years of history, this period can be a lot to swallow.

Nevertheless, there is a connection. From the earliest books and stories written down in cuneiform, to the exquisite scrolls and poetry of the Roman Empire at its highest extent, some facts can clearly be noted. For one thing, The Literary Hero of this period is generally a warrior type. He (there are very few female heroes during this time) is usually very strong, and tends to solve problems with a combination of both his great strength and cunning. The existence of various pantheons is discussed (and even critiqued, in a few stories), and many of the gods of a particular culture are often pitted against this hero. He is often unsuccessful, which tells us the hardship and tragedy in living in a time that did not have the benefits and comforts of modern technology.

The Ancient Hero is different than most would suspect in a particular way; he is often hardly what one would call a “hero”. Most ancient characters are brutish thugs, who take what they want, be it women, money, and other valuables, and murder their way through anyone who opposes them. Furthermore, they tend to flaunt their skills and very existence before the gods, who by our understanding, legislate what is right and wrong. The hero is often led into battle with the gods, and he almost always loses. A harsh reality that the people of the ancient

world faced was that no one could change their own destiny, not even the son of a god.

## I.

### Gilgamesh

Perhaps the oldest known literary hero, Gilgamesh's story goes back nearly 4000 years. Allegedly a real king, Gilgamesh is estimated to have ruled the Sumerian city of Uruk around 2700 BC.<sup>4</sup> The story is probably Sumerian in origin, but the only copies we have are written in much later Akkadian and Babylonian. Because of its age, we have very little knowledge apart from what the texts explicitly tell us.

Sumer was the oldest known civilization we know of, and some of the oldest stories recorded have come from this area. Originally arranged as independent city states each ruled by a king, Sumerian life centered around farming and regular warfare with other city-states.<sup>5</sup> The king was seen as being born of the gods, meaning that his rule was a divine mandate. Sumer's belief system survived through millennia, influencing the Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian mythos and event their cultures. The gods, the *Anunaki*, were deities mostly of the firmament, that is, the world above. The gods descended to earth to create humans, and did so on whim. They then ruled the planet for thousands of years, founding the Sumerian Kings List, most of which survives to this day. However, after displeasure with their creation, the gods sent, among other things, a flood to destroy the world. They designated one man, a righteous fellow named Utnapishtim (compare to the Biblical Noah) to survive, and destroyed all the rest (Utnapishtim shows up later in the story). One of the underlying themes in the story is the omnipotence of the gods, and man's inability to affect his own destiny. This would go on to categorize much of ancient literature, even up into the Greco-Roman period.

While we may not know everything about the culture, we do know enough about the character. Gilgamesh was the king of Uruk, a Sumerian city-state whose origin goes back into the mists of time. He was the son of a king (or priest), and the goddess Ninsun, a minor deity

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<sup>4</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Tr. N.K. Sanders. Penguin Books. Middlesex, UK. 1960. Print. Pg. 20.

<sup>5</sup>Wilkinson, Philip. *Myths and Legends: An Illustrated Guide to their Origins and Meanings*. Dorling Kindersley. New York, NY. 2009. Print. Pg. 149.

worshipped in Uruk. Gilgamesh was fifth in line on the Sumerian Kings List, dated after the Great Flood that destroyed the world, and he was truly a god among men. In truth, Gilgamesh's reign in the Kings List is the last to be reported as lasting longer than average, a total of 126 years.<sup>6</sup> He was stronger than anyone on earth; "Two thirds they (the gods) made him god and one third man."<sup>7</sup> A warrior of unimaginable power, Gilgamesh was still, however, very human in his quest for power.

"But the men of Uruk muttered in their houses, 'Gilgamesh sounds the tocsin for his amusement, his arrogance has no bounds by day or night. No son is left with his father, for Gilgamesh takes them all, even the children; yet the king should be a shepherd for his people.'"<sup>8</sup>

Gilgamesh, despite all his gifts and strength, is himself very petty; he does whatever he wants, takes whatever he wants, and challenges the gods to do anything about it. And they do just that: they first created an enemy for him, to match him fist for fist. This man, Enkidu, was his equal in every way. When they came to face each other, Gilgamesh was impressed with his strength, and they became best friends. They continue to challenge the gods together, battling monsters of all kinds. Between the two of them, nothing can stand in their way.

It is not long into the poem when Gilgamesh first discusses his views on eternity.

"Gilgamesh replied: "Where is the man who can clamber to heaven? Only the gods live for ever with glorious Shamash (the sun god, Gilgamesh's grandfather), but as for us men, our days are numbered, our occupations are a breath of wind.'"<sup>9</sup>

Despite his lusting for carnal pleasures, what Gilgamesh really wants is immortality. He knows that he cannot challenge the gods forever, and, while he is not necessarily afraid of their judgments, he still dreads dying on a sick bed, gasping for air and wailing over a life that was too short. It could be said that his actions, however irreverent they might be, are his attempts to have himself remembered forever in the hearts of the people.

After killing the monster Humbaba, Enkidu is struck down by the gods with disease. As he is dying, he tells his friend of the horrible truth of life.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Tr. N.K. Sanders. Penguin Books. Middlesex, UK. 1960. Print. Pg. 20.

<sup>7</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Tr. N.K. Sanders. Penguin Books. Middlesex, UK. 1960. Print. Pg. 61.

<sup>8</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Tr. N.K. Sanders. Penguin Books. Middlesex, UK. 1960. Print. Pg. 62

<sup>9</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Tr. N.K. Sanders. Penguin Books. Middlesex, UK. 1960. Print. Pg. 71.

“There is the house whose people sit in darkness; dust is their food and clay their meat. They are clothed like birds with wings for covering, they see no light, they sit in darkness. I entered the house of dust and I saw the kings of the earth, their crowns put away for ever...they who had stood in the place of the gods like Anu and Enlil, stood now like servants to fetch baked meats in the house of dust...”<sup>10</sup>

He dies, and Gilgamesh is grief-stricken. He becomes a shell of his former self; he spends his days crying in misery and praying for the secret of eternal life. He eventually makes up his mind to visit Utnapishtim, the one man to whom the gods granted immortality. He journeys to Dilmun (modern-day Bahrain), and meets with Utnapishtim. But the old man has nothing to give. He says:

“There is no permanence. Do we build a home to stand for ever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an inheritance to keep for ever, does the flood-time of rivers endure?...From the days of old, there is no permanence.”<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, Utnapishtim decides to test Gilgamesh, challenging him to stay awake long enough to tell the gods of his plight. But Gilgamesh, with all his strength, is exhausted, and sleeps for seven days. Utnapishtim decides then to have mercy on him, and gives to him a flower that, when consumed, will restore Gilgamesh’s youth. But the king does not consume it, and loses it on the way back home. He weeps, having lost the very reason he came all this way. He returns to his kingdom and his family. His journey was not in vain, however, as he brought to his fellow man the story of the Flood and the times before it. In time, Gilgamesh rests with his fathers, “without equal among men”<sup>12</sup>.

The story is, itself, a caution. It warns against hoping to change one’s destiny, for as surely as all men die, so all men are not gods. Even the mightiest of characters are not choosers of their own destiny. The lesson to take from the book is to do good, to be good, to be wise, and know that you will never be able to change what you are. Mortals are mortals, and the gods are the gods. It is not for man to question them, no matter how strong they are. The Sumerian way

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<sup>10</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Tr. N.K. Sanders. Penguin Books. Middlesex, UK. 1960. Print. Pg. 92.

<sup>11</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Tr. N.K. Sanders. Penguin Books. Middlesex, UK. 1960. Print. Pg. 106-107.

<sup>12</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Tr. N.K. Sanders. Penguin Books. Middlesex, UK. 1960. Print. Pg. 119.

of life taught that man cannot change his own fate; Gilgamesh served as a cautionary tale that served to inspire the rulers of nations for millennia. The first tablets of the story discovered were found in the library of Ashurbanipal, a king who ruled nearly 2000 years later.<sup>13</sup> And though nearly 4000 years encompass the Ancient Period, these truths remain the same throughout, albeit taking different forms. The story of Gilgamesh set the stage for all that would come after.

## II.

### Achilles

And so history went on. Mesopotamia was conquered several times, and power passed from one area to another. Within the next 1500 years after Gilgamesh, power had shifted to the Mediterranean. Around 1500 BC a power struggle arose between the Achaeans (early Greeks) and the Hittites. After several centuries of war, the Achaeans emerged on top, and Classical Civilization dawned. And though the Achaeans would go on to form what would become Greek culture, they never quite forgot the glory of their long-gone age of heroes. They immortalized such heroes in myths, in songs, in poetry, giving glory to those that came before them. As time went on, and those days became more and more distant, the stories became more and more inherently Greek, communicating the ideas and philosophies that were apparent in Greek civilization.

Around 800 BC, the shadowy poet Homer composed an epic poem detailing the most famous skirmish between the Achaeans and the Hittites, now given the Grecian name “Trojans”, named after the city of Troy in Asia Minor. In it, the Achaeans fought tooth and nail with their hated enemies; for ten long years they fought to win back Helen, queen of Mycenae, from Paris, prince of Troy. This all seems quite petty, fighting a massive war over a girl’s choice of lover, but that is perhaps the point.

Greek literature is filled with heroes of great strength or intelligence who have a single flaw that, in the end, undoes them. Be it arrogance, weakness in the moment of truth, lust, or simply being born to the wrong parents, the Greek hero is always undone by something that is

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<sup>13</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Tr. N.K. Sanders. Penguin Books. Middlesex, UK. 1960. Print. Pg. 8.

almost, if not entirely, their fault. Even the greatest of the Greek heroes are not spared of this. For Achilles, mightiest of all the Achaeans, his mistake would nearly doom their cause, however petty it might be.

Anger be now your song, Immortal one,  
 Akhilleus' (Achilles) anger, doomed and ruinous,  
 That caused the Akhaians (Achaeans) loss on bitter loss  
 And crowded brave souls into the undergloom,  
 Leaving so many dead men-carrion  
 For dogs and birds; and the will of Zeus was done.<sup>14</sup>

Achilles was by far the greatest of all the warriors; the “first in rank of all Akhaians”.<sup>15</sup> After nine years of bloody war, Achilles was disrespected by one of the Achaean leaders, Agamemnon, who took Achilles’ slave girl for his own pleasure. In a fit of jealous rage, Achilles leaves the battle, allowing the tide to turn in the Troy’s favor.

It is important to note here that Achilles’ weakness is both his arrogance and his wrath. He understands how important he is to the cause, and this causes him to demand things from his own side. Humility is not a common trait of Greek heroes, who are often undone by their irreverence towards the gods. Much like Gilgamesh, Achilles believes that his strength gives him the right to do as he pleases, and when it is denied to him, he moves to the side to pout like an ungrateful child. As hundreds of Achaeans fall because of his absence, he simply snorts his disdain at the men who had been his closest friends these past nine years.

It is by the sixteenth book that Achilles best friend, Patroclus, chides him for his arrogance.

“But you are a hard case,  
 Akhilleus! God forbid this rage you nurse  
 Should master me. You and this fearsome pride!  
 What good will come of it to anyone, later,

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<sup>14</sup> Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. Anchor Books. Garden City, NY. 1974. Print. Pg. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. Anchor Books. Garden City, NY. 1974. Print. Pg. 14.

Unless you keep disaster from the Argives?

Have you no pity?"<sup>16</sup>

When Achilles still refuses to return, Patroclus, with Achilles' permission, takes his armor. He enters the battlefield, attempting to scare off the Trojans with the knowledge of Achilles' return. But he is soon set upon by Hector, Troy's mightiest warrior, and killed. Hector then takes Achilles' armor from Patroclus' body, as an insult directed at the Achaeans' greatest warrior.

It is here that Achilles' other weakness is shown. On hearing of the death of his friend, Achilles flies into a rage. He swears vengeance upon Hector, and reenters the battlefield, after being armed by Hephaestus and Athena themselves. But before he does so, his own horse, Xanthos, warns him that, if he should fight Hector, he will surely die.

"Yes, we (Xanthos and Balios, his horses) shall save you,

This time, too, Akhilleus, in your strength!

And yet the day of your destruction comes,

And it is nearer. We are not the cause,

But rather a great god is, and mighty fate...

We might run swiftly as the west wind blows

Most rapid of all winds, they say; but still

It is your destiny to be brought low

By force, a god's and a man's!"<sup>17</sup>

In his anger, he forgets the warning, and roars back into battle, cutting a great wound across the fields of Troy. He at last comes upon Hector, who he kills and then dishonors by stripping the body and tying it to his chariot to be dragged around the battlefield. Even his fellow Achaeans are disgusted, but Achilles refuses to stop. Finally, Hector's father, King Priam of Troy, comes out and persuades him to give him the body. It is only when Achilles is made to think about his own father that he is convinced, and his anger calmed. It is here that *The Iliad* ends.

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<sup>16</sup> Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. Anchor Books. Garden City, NY. 1974. Print. Pg. 378.

<sup>17</sup> Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. Anchor Books. Garden City, NY. 1974. Print. Pg. 470.

The story goes on, however, continuing on with Homer's sequel, *The Odyssey*. The first part details the closing of the war, culminating with Achilles' death at the hands of cowardly Paris. His anger having undone him, Achilles died, still young and strong.

Despite the fact that Achilles and Gilgamesh came from different worlds, they are similar in more ways than one. They were both mighty leaders of men, stronger than everyone else, and arrogant to a fault. They were held as gods, and indeed they were, if only in part. But perhaps most intriguing is that both are undone by their arrogance, and too late discover that their actions have consequences. Though Gilgamesh gets a chance at a happy ending and Achilles does not, the point still stands that both learned the hard way that pride is one's own downfall. Achilles' story defined Greek culture, and all other heroes seemed to have been measured by it.

"And then, there was Achilles. Now there was a guy who had it all. The build. The footspeed. He could jam! He could take a hit! He could keep on coming. But that *furshlugginer* heel of his! He barely gets nicked there once and kaboom! He's history."<sup>18</sup>

This quote from Disney's version of the satyr Philoctetes tells us virtually everything we need to know about Achilles. Viewed as one of the greatest warriors of all time, his flaws led to his own downfall, a theme that serves to be the most important lesson the Greeks ever taught us. But even death could not keep us from remembering him.

### III. Rama

As one of the world's oldest civilizations, India stands almost as a world in itself, an entire subcontinent filled with a plethora of cultures and languages. India is by no means a nation of one people, but one system has, in a way, crafted a kind of unity that has existed for nearly 1500 years. The religion of Hinduism, native to India, grew out of the beliefs of the Vedic period, influencing the rise of many kingdoms over a period that we are still scrambling to understand.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most prominent, Kosala, centered in Ayodhya (in modern day Uttar Pradesh), was the site of one of India's most famous epic stories, *The Ramayana*.<sup>20</sup> The main character of

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<sup>18</sup> Disney's Hercules. Dir. John Musker and Ron Clements. Walt Disney Pictures, 1997. Film.

<sup>19</sup> Wilkinson, Philip. *Myths and Legends: An Illustrated Guide to their Origins and Meanings*. Dorling Kindersley. New York, NY. 2009. Print. Pg. 187.

the poem, Prince Rama, was an avatar of the god Vishnu, one of Hinduism's central deities. A man of extraordinary power and wisdom, Rama was considered the greatest of men. Paired with his wife Sita, they were symbolic of the perfect couple, an image of gods on earth. Rama accomplished many great things, including defeating the seemingly unkillable demon Ravana. But in keeping with the ancient world tradition, Rama makes a mistake and loses his wife, his greatest and most loyal friend. As perfect as he was, Rama is still not spared from the cold, dark reality of this impermanent world. In this way, he is more like Gilgamesh and Achilles than a cursory glance would reveal.

Rama was born to Dasaratha, king of Kosala, and his first (of three) wife Kausalya.

"Kausalya bore an infant blest  
With Heavenly marks of grace impressed;  
Rama, the universe's lord,  
A prince by all the world adored."<sup>21</sup>

The child grew to a man of great virtue and strength, one who put the cause of justice before his own desires.

"And lends his aid, and ne'er in vain,  
The cause of justice to maintain.  
...Well skilled is he the bow to draw,  
Well trained in arts and versed in law;  
High-souled and meet for happy fate,  
Most tender and compassionate."<sup>22</sup>

In Hinduism, the universe is balanced around three primary gods: Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Sustainer, and Shiva the Destroyer.<sup>23</sup> Vishnu was seen as the defender of all life, a

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<sup>20</sup> [http://www.gloriousindia.com/history/kosala\\_kingdom.html](http://www.gloriousindia.com/history/kosala_kingdom.html).

<sup>21</sup> Valmiki. *The Ramayana*. Trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith, M.A. London, UK: Trübner and Co., 1874. Project Gutenberg. Print.

<sup>22</sup> Valmiki. *The Ramayana*. Trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith, M.A. London, UK: Trübner and Co., 1874. Project Gutenberg. Print.

pursuer of justice, and a loving caretaker of mankind. As the god Vishnu incarnated on earth ("The peer of Vishnu's power and might"), Rama has a responsibility to keep justice on earth as a king to his people, a husband to his wife, and a demigod to mankind.

When King Visvamisra calls for his adopted daughter Sita to be wed, Rama asks for her hand in marriage. Visvamisra decides to give Sita's hand to any who could string the ancient bow of Shiva. Rama does this, and he and Sita are married. And all seems to be going well until one of Dasaratha's other wives demands years later that Rama be banished in favor of her son.<sup>24</sup>

Heartbroken, Dasaratha banishes Rama, Sita, and Rama's brother Lakshmana. But Rama proves himself to be a loyal son and goes willingly, having several adventures with his wife and brother in the wilderness. Then the demon Ravana discovers Sita, and, entranced by her beauty, steals her away. Rama flies into a rage very uncharacteristic of him, but Lakshmana calms him down.

"Thy heart was ever soft and kind,  
To every creature's good inclined.  
Cast not thy tender mood away,  
Nor yield to anger's mastering way."<sup>25</sup>

Rama goes to recruit an army through his generosity and leadership skills, and battles Ravana in an all-out war. Rama finally destroys Ravana, but refuses to let hatred get the better of him the way Achilles did.

"Then Rama answered. 'Hatred dies  
When low in dust the foeman lies.  
Now triumph bids the conflict cease,  
And knits us in the bonds of peace.'"<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Wilkinson, Philip. *Myths and Legends: An Illustrated Guide to their Origins and Meanings*. Dorling Kindersley. New York, NY. 2009. Print. Pg. 197.

<sup>24</sup> Valmiki. *The Ramayana*. Trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith, M.A. London, UK: Trübner and Co., 1874. Project Gutenberg. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Valmiki. *The Ramayana*. Trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith, M.A. London, UK: Trübner and Co., 1874. Project Gutenberg. Print.

Impressed by his wise judgment, Ravana's brother allows Rama to install him as king, and they part ways with no hatred. Rama returns with Sita to Ayodhya, where, after a test to ensure her fidelity, they are happily married once again for many years. This is traditionally where the story ends. However, a later edition spoke of a more tragic ending.

Years later, gossip reaches Rama's ears that Sita is unfaithful, despite having passed the test of fidelity.<sup>27</sup> Overcome by a very human jealousy, he banishes her, not knowing that she was pregnant with his sons. Later on, he encounters his sons, Luv and Kush, who sing to him a song about their mother taught to them by Valmiki, the author of the entire poem. Rama asks for Sita to return; Sita is happy that her sons are reclaimed by Rama, but her heart is still broken from being abandoned. She allows herself to be swallowed up by her mother, the earth itself. Rama, in a moment of human weakness, loses his wife and greatest friend.

Rama is one of the greatest heroes of Indian legend. He is powerful, judicious, kind, and loving. He represented all of what Indians considered a perfect king, a model for all men to follow. His relationship with Sita was the ideal marriage, and though it ended tragically, such an ending was there to show that tragedy and loss were a reality, and that the mistakes anyone makes follow them in all that they do. Despite his near perfection and godlike status, Rama is still very human and, just like Gilgamesh and Achilles, is ultimately undone by the choices he makes. He has a basic desire to love and be loved, but also to conquer, expand, and throw his power about like the god he knows he is. While he is certainly not as arrogant and brash as Gilgamesh and Achilles, he is still very much a product of human nature.

"From old Ikshvaku's line he came,  
Known to the world by Rama's name:  
With soul subdued, a chief of might,  
In Scripture versed, in glory bright...  
Tall and broad-shouldered, strong of limb

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<sup>26</sup> Valmiki. *The Ramayana*. Trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith, M.A. London, UK: Trübner and Co., 1874. Project Gutenberg. Print.

<sup>27</sup> <http://universalteacher.com/1/uttara-kanda-valmiki-ramayana-story/>

Fortune has set her mark on him."<sup>28</sup>

The Ancient period is a diverse one; no one claim can wrap it all up. It is a time of great empires, of men of renown. The literature of the time reflected man's belief in the futility of struggle, of the forces of destiny and the gods who would not bend to allow their creation to attain their power. Man is fleeting, and the gods are supreme. But some men, born of the gods, have some of their divine parents' great power, and use it to achieve great feats, usually becoming of their baser desires. Be it Gilgamesh, who used his strength to enslave men and sleep with women, or Achilles, an unapologetic soldier who waged his own personal war to gain revenge for the murder of his friend, or Rama, the noble prince that saved his wife but undid their marriage through mistrust and pettiness. If there is one point to be had here, it is that man is fallible, and that he can never change who he is.

## The Medieval Period

(500 AD- 1600)

When the mind is brought the word "Medieval", thoughts of knights in shining armor and fierce dragons preying on helpless princesses come to mind. Indeed, the Middle Ages were a time of knights, and their stories were full of said knights vanquishing monsters and rescuing women. But it goes further than that. The Middle Ages were a time of great culture flowering, where the nations of Europe began to consolidate into powerful kingdoms, and the ways of the Church aided the development of a unique artistic sentiment that echoed across the continent. Even around the world, countries in Asia, Africa, and even the Americas were in the middle of nation-state building, which would have a permanent effect on the future centuries. Across the planet, countries were consolidating their power, and their art flourished during this time. Literature was duly affected, and it began its slow transition into the narrative that we would most recognize today as the novel. But before that could happen, it had to survive through centuries of warfare and upheaval.

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<sup>28</sup> Valmiki. *The Ramayana*. Trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith, M.A. London, UK: Trübner and Co., 1874. Project Gutenberg. Print.

The Middle Ages were a complex time, and little could be said to unite the period save for the influence of the Church and the concept of chivalry. Chivalry was the standard by which any knight or warrior was to measure himself. While specifically attached to Medieval Europe, the practice can clearly be observed in other cultures, save for a few changes here and there. What presents a more unified view of this era in regards to the history of the world, is that its literature is structured around heroes, usually with a firm grounding in religious doctrine, fighting for their lord, to whom they owe allegiance, and most often give their lives in service of a justice that is beyond the mortal realm. The Medieval German nun and philosopher Hildegard von Bingen wrote,

"Thus prosperity and adversity are of this world. They are not to be completely rejected, since useful things purge the harmful and the harmful purge the useful, just as gold is refined in the fire...The soul is a witness to Heaven and the flesh is a witness to the earth. The flesh afflicts the soul, but the soul restrains the flesh."<sup>29</sup>

The Medieval Hero is greatly affected by his own nature. Differing greatly from the rampaging, woman-stealing, god-challenging Ancient Hero, the Medieval Hero is often a more pious and respectful sort. Recognizing the rules of chivalry, he (or she, as will be noted later) has an outlook that reflects the highest of life's virtues, and pursues the Good with all his heart, heeding not the call of the world and its pleasures. This is not of course to mean that the Medieval hero is not a good warrior; far from it. Warfare and combat in the name of preserving justice and truth is not just the right of the warrior, but the responsibility. These duties, coupled with the loyalty owed to their lord, serve to anchor the Medieval Hero in a firm ground of moral understanding and responsibility.

### **I. Beowulf**

Often considered the dawning of British Literature, the epic Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* is one of the most beloved in the English language. Set in the dark recesses of Scandinavian history, it centers on a young Geatish prince, who sails to a kingdom of Danes to save them from a monster. It goes on to record his becoming king, and eventually dying in

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<sup>29</sup> Von Bingen, Hildegard. *The Book of Life's Merits. Secrets of God: Writings of Hildegard of Bingen.* Selec. Sabina Flanagan. Shambhala Publications, Inc. Boston, MA. 1996. Print. Pg. 56.

battle against a fierce dragon. In short, it details the life and exploits, in exquisite Germanic tradition, of one of the Nordic world's greatest literary champions.

Rooted in Nordic culture, the poem follows a narrative that is exquisitely, powerfully, German. After Rome fell, the German peoples, who now had Europe (most of it) to themselves, established their ways as the cultural norm. The ways of Greece and Rome would not be revived until the Renaissance, and therefore German culture took the forefront. Most important to this thought was the centralization of the "Warrior King" character, the noble, wise ruler who is also at the same time the strongest of all his people. Equated with Christ after their Christianization, the German Warrior King is the centerpiece of the story; his struggles are placed where all can drink in from his glory.

Beowulf is certainly no stranger to this concept. Fitted into Christian tradition by later chroniclers (including the poem's presumed writer), the title character Beowulf is a very much of the Warrior King mold; one that uses his might to protect, not simply destroy. It should be noted here that this is where this period differs from the Ancient Period. The Medieval Hero is (for the most part) entrenched in morality, and to what extent they follow this determines how they end up as a character. The Ancient Hero is generally bound by no morality save for his own; even Rama, noble as he was, struck out on his own (such as the sparing of Ravana's brother) when he felt that it was right. Author and scholar J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in his essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics", that it could be said that man's desire to depart from morality is often what drives the Medieval stories. He wrote, "He (Beowulf) has no enmeshed loyalties, nor hapless love. He is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy."<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, it could be said that Beowulf as a character is morally good because he does not give in to baser pleasures. This is a defining piece of Medieval thought, which would come to exemplify the chivalrous knight. Beowulf is not without faults, but he is certainly more than the average man. Despite all this, the link between the Ancient Hero is still visible, and can be seen quite plainly by anyone. The above quote can work just as much for the Medieval Hero as

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<sup>30</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics". *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston, MA. 1984. Print. Pg. 18.

much for the Ancient Hero.

The plot is relatively simple. A monster comes to the land of the Danes. "Grendel was that grim creature called, the ill-famed hunter of the marshes of the land...for the Maker had proscribed him with the race of Cain."<sup>31</sup> This reference to the first murder, Cain, is what serves to link Grendel with unspeakable evil. Hating the merriment of men, the monster comes to bring grim murder and great mourning to fill the void of mirth. The Danish king, Hrothgar, is beside himself with grief. That is, until Beowulf shows up.

Beowulf introduces himself as the son of a famous warrior, whom Hrothgar recognizes. "Voyagers by sea... have since reported that he hath in the grasp of his hand the might and power of thirty men, valiant in battle."<sup>32</sup> Beowulf tells them that he intends to fight the monster on his own his own terms, without armor or weapons. "Nay, we two shall this night reject the blade, if he dare have recourse to warfare without weapons, and then let the foreseeing God, the Holy Lord, adjudge the glory to whichever side him seemeth meet."<sup>33</sup> Beowulf faces Grendel that night, and succeeds where all others had failed; he tears the creature's arm off, sending him bleeding away into the night. But that is not the end of their troubles.

Grendel's mother, out for revenge against the man who murdered her son, murders many of the Danes and Geats, and takes home his arm, which had been used as a trophy. Beowulf then announces come the morn that he will finish what he started, and kill Grendel's mother. To Hrothgar, he says, "To each one of us shall come in time the end of life in the world; let him who may earn glory ere his death. No better thing can brave knight leave behind when he lies dead."<sup>34</sup> With this, he goes to meet her in her underwater lair. She proves to be much more powerful than her son, but Beowulf kills her all the same, with some help from an ancient rune sword. Beowulf returns to great adulation, and Hrothgar gives thanks for his existence. After a great celebration, Beowulf goes home.

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<sup>31</sup> *Beowulf*. Trans. J.R.R. Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin. Boston, MA. 2014. Print. Pg. 16.

<sup>32</sup> *Beowulf*. Trans. J.R.R. Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin. Boston, MA. 2014. Print. Pg. 23.

<sup>33</sup> *Beowulf*. Trans. J.R.R. Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin. Boston, MA. 2014. Print. Pg. 32.

<sup>34</sup> *Beowulf*. Trans. J.R.R. Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin. Boston, MA. 2014. Print. Pg. 53.

After many years, Beowulf becomes a king himself. He rules justly for many years, until the third and final monster rears its head. A dragon, aroused by a thief stealing its gold, comes out from its slumber and pillages the countryside. More daunting even than Grendel or his mother, the dragon is all but unstoppable. But Beowulf is not deterred.

"Yet I will not from the barrow's-keeper flee one foot' pace, but to us twain hereafter shall it be done at the mound's side, even as Fate, the Portion of each man, decrees to us. Fearless is my heart, wherefore I forbear from vaunting threat against this wingéd foe."<sup>35</sup>

He faces the dragon, alone, and nearly dies. But a single man, a young warrior named Wiglaf, comes to his aid. With his strength failing, Beowulf slays the creature. He gives his final instructions to Wiglaf, and dies. He is buried in a great cairn, and mourned deeply by all.

"Then about the tomb rode warriors valiant, sons of princes, twelve men in all, who would their woe bewail, their king's lament...that man praising, honouring his prowess and his mighty deeds, his worth esteeming...when forth he must from the raiment of flesh be taken far away."<sup>36</sup>

Beowulf is perhaps the most famous of the Warrior King characters. He is a proud, glory-seeking champion, who desires nothing less than to be remembered forever. But also in his person is the drive to do good, to protect as much as to conquer. Beowulf is a man of great kindness and compassion, who is as loyal to his people as they are to him. He gives glory to God, and it is thrust back upon him. In respect to the German tradition, he ascends to Valhalla, content.

## **II. Rostam**

Across the world, from the frozen north to the burning western sands, we find a character not much different from Beowulf himself. Rostam, an ancient Persian hero of great strength and nobility, is very similar in thought and practice with Beowulf. Written down by the Medieval poet Abolqasem Ferdowsi in the tenth century AD, Rostam is the mightiest of men, and the greatest of warriors. And though many hundreds of miles separate them, the two are both symbolic of their culture's virtues.

Rostam is a very old character, much older, perhaps, than the Middle Ages. But because

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<sup>35</sup> *Beowulf*. Trans. J.R.R. Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin. Boston, MA. 2014. Print. Pg. 86.

<sup>36</sup> *Beowulf*. Trans. J.R.R. Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin. Boston, MA. 2014. Print. Pg. 105.

Ferdowsi lived during this time, and wrote with a Medieval thinker's mind, he will be included in this era. As the religion of Islam spread through the Middle East, the empire of Persia crumbled, and Persian culture was largely replaced with that of Arabic. The Persians, while converted to Islam, were unhappy with their Arab overlords, and sought to fight against the death of their ways by preserving them in writing.<sup>37</sup> One of them was Ferdowsi.

Seeing his work both as for the preservation of his culture and the rejection of the way of the invaders, he composed an epic of considerable girth to tell the story of his proud nation. Encompassing all of history up to his own time, the poem concerns many great heroes who made Persia into a great nation. Perhaps the most prominent of these is Rostam.

Rostam is a giant of a man, a proud soldier of great valor who uses his superhuman strength to solve his tasks. He is stronger, faster, and better than any other man. But most important to his character is his attachment to righteousness. Translator Dick Davis writes, "The nature of the good man, the good hero, is a central focus of Ferdowsi's concern, and this suggests another recurrent characteristic of the poem, which is its strong ethical bias. The characters we seem most strongly invited to admire...constantly ask themselves not 'How do I win?', but 'How do I act well?'."<sup>38</sup>

This can be seen to draw a parallel with the European Medieval tradition, which put honor and righteousness above skill in battle. Rostam is well aware of his duty to God and Country.

"And Rostam answered Zal: 'Pleasure and wine,  
Feasting and rest, are no concern of mine-  
Hard-pressed in war, or on the battlefield,  
With God to aid me, I shall never yield."<sup>39</sup>

Rostam was born to the warrior Zal and his wife Rudabeh, servants of the kingdom of Persia. When he comes out of his mother, he is already massive and covered in hair, hinting at

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<sup>37</sup> Ferdowsi. *The Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Trans. Dick Davis. Penguin Classics. New York, NY. 2006. Print. Intro. Pg. XVII.

<sup>38</sup> Ferdowsi. *The Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Trans. Dick Davis. Penguin Classics. New York, NY. 2006. Print. Intro. Pg. XV.

<sup>39</sup> Ferdowsi. *The Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Trans. Dick Davis. Penguin Classics. New York, NY. 2006. Print. Pg. 131.

his future greatness.

"The child was like a lion, a noble son,  
Tall and handsome, lovely to look upon;  
And all who saw this mammoth baby gazed  
In wonder of him, murmuring and amazed."<sup>40</sup>

Already a superhuman as a child, Rostam grows to become Persia's mightiest soldier, accomplishing many feats over the course of his life. He tames a wild horse too strong for anyone else to ride, and accomplishes seven labors (compare to Hercules' twelve) to prove his worth to his king. Most famous of these is his battle with the white demon, not unlike Beowulf's battle with Grendel. He completes them all, and impresses the king of Persia himself.

After all this, he takes part in the great war against Turan (Central Asia). This war takes up over three hundred pages of the poem's nine hundred, placing it among the most important events in the story. Rostam is present through nearly all of it, winning great victories for Persia. In time, he comes to Turan, and falls in love with a woman there, named Tahmineh. He sleeps with her, and leaves her behind to continue fighting. She becomes pregnant, and gives birth to a son near the equal of his father. Afraid that Rostam will take him away, Tahmineh does not tell him, and raises the son herself. Named Sohrab, the boy becomes a mighty warrior, the greatest of his peers.

Eventually, she tells him of his father, and Sohrab decides to meet the famous Rostam in battle. This is more of a way to see his father in action, not a desire born of hate; Sohrab is an innocent lad who is only intent on meeting his father. But his actions cause serious repercussions.

Sohrab provokes a rebirth on conflict between the two sides, and war resumes. Sohrab indeed meets Rostam on the battlefield, and is awed by his father's strength. But Rostam does not recognize him, unaware that he even had a son. Tragically, Rostam kills Sohrab, who, in his last breath, tells Rostam who he is. Rostam is grief-stricken, and departs from the battle.

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<sup>40</sup> Ferdowsi. *The Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Trans. Dick Davis. Penguin Classics. New York, NY. 2006. Print. Pg. 105.

"This tale is full of tears, and Rostam leaves  
The tender heart indignant as it grieves."<sup>41</sup>

The poem then puts him aside for a while to focus on other characters. But Rostam never leaves; his presence keeps Persia's cause alive. Even after Persia is conquered by the Turanian king Afrosyab, he continues to fight. Full of the power of God, Rostam defies Afrosyab, and is hunted down by an assassin, his own brother, Shaghad. Cornered by one of his own kinsmen, Rostam and his horse Rakksh are severely wounded, and Rostam knows death is imminent. But he strings his bow, and kills Shaghad by firing an arrow through a tree trunk into his throat. As life escapes from his lips, he says,

"Thanks be to God, to whom for all my days  
I've offered worship and unceasing praise  
That now, as night comes on, with my last breath,  
Vengeance and power are mine before my death."<sup>42</sup>

Rostam is the example by which Persia measured their heroes. One of the great examples of Middle-Eastern literary tradition, he is a prime case of both the Islamic and Persian hero. Born of Zoroastrianism, yet reborn in Islam, Rostam is the champion of both worlds. His life is an inspiration for many, and his equal is never found in the rest of the story. Tall as a cypress and strong as a lion, Rostam was the last remnant of the Persian man that Ferdowsi lamented was lost forever.

### III. Kriemhild

Something apparent in every story is the characterization of love. Love is often the driving force of the main character, and is usually the main reason why they do what they do. Love was an important part of Medieval tale; the extent to which the person does or does not love their spouse, their friends, their lords, or God is usually what defines their character and leads to their fate.

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<sup>41</sup> Ferdowsi. *The Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Trans. Dick Davis. Penguin Classics. New York, NY. 2006. Print. Pg. 214.

<sup>42</sup> Ferdowsi. *The Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Trans. Dick Davis. Penguin Classics. New York, NY. 2006. Print. Pg. 537.

Directly after the fall of Rome, the Germanic tribes that inhabited the outskirts of the empire ran all over Europe, and set up kingdoms of their own, most of them being from the ashes of the Roman Empire. And, as can be expected, their cultural norms mixed with the Roman structure, and gave birth to a new way of life in and of itself. The Middle Ages were born from the marrying of German feudal organization with Roman society. As the German kingdoms consolidated their power, they were prone to constant wars with each other, leading to the development of many stories that came in the centuries after. One such story is the *Nibelungenlied*.

An epic poem written in the early 13th century, the *Nibelungenlied* is set at some distant point in the 5th century, somewhere after the Fall of Rome.<sup>43</sup> It concerns the concepts of love and loyalty, and how far a person will go to show their love.

As a side note, in a Christian society like Medieval Germany, love was an essential part of life. People must show love to each other; husbands will love their wives, wives their husbands, children their parents, friends their other friends, and all their lords. Feudal structure was built upon loyalty and allegiance to one's lord; it was an ancient Germanic custom that married well with Christianity. Just as God loves you, you must love others. And just as God rules over you, and cares for you, so your liege-lord rules and cares for you also. Both are worthy of your loyalty.

These concepts of love and fidelity are highlighted in the *Nibelungenlied*, whose story concerns a princess and the warrior that has fought for her love. And her love is much to be desired; in very Greek-like fashion, her beauty and love is the downfall of two great kingdoms.

Siegfried the Volsung is an ancient Germanic hero that dates back centuries. A knight of unmatched strength and nobility, he is considered the greatest of knights. He is portrayed as mighty: striking blows that "filled the plain with their sound and sent fiery sparks flying from his enemy's helmet as though from huge torches"<sup>44</sup>, and is "handsome as though limned on parchment with all a master's skill"<sup>45</sup>. In his youth, he battled and slew a dragon, bathing in its

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<sup>43</sup> *The Nibelungenlied*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. Penguin Classics. Middlesex, UK. 1965. Print. Pg. 7. (Foreword).

<sup>44</sup> *The Nibelungenlied*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. Penguin Classics. Middlesex, UK. 1965. Print. Pg. 37.

blood and giving him near invulnerability. He then set his eyes on finding a wife.

It is then that we at last come to our hero. Most scholars and readers assume that Siegfried is the main character of the story. He is, indeed, the center of many great Germanic myths, and is the star of the Icelandic adaption of the same story, *The Volsungasaga*. But it is his wife, Kriemhild, who is truly the main character of this great poem.

Introduced in the beginning, Kriemhild is a princess of unmatched beauty.

"In the land of the Burgundians there grew up a maiden of high lineage, so fair that none in any land could be fairer. Her name was Kriemhild. She came to be a beautiful woman, causing many knights to lose their lives."<sup>45</sup>

Kriemhild was desired far and wide by knights of all kinds, who fought for her love; even as far away as Etzel, king of the Huns (possibly Attila himself) desires her for a wife. She begins the story very innocent; she dreams of a prince to sweep her away off to a kingdom to rule by his side. And that is exactly what she gets.

Siegfried hears of her, and rides to Burgundia to see her. When they first meet, Siegfried promises her that he will do anything to win her favor. This is where the story grows complicated. Kriemhild's brother, King Gunther, tells Siegfried that to win his sister's hand, he must help Gunther himself win the hand of the Lady Brunhild, Queen of Iceland. A woman of unmatched strength and fiery beauty, Gunther desires her for himself. Siegfried does indeed help Gunther, and succeeds in subduing Brunhild without letting her see him. Brunhild, believing Gunther to be the one man who could defeat her, agrees to marry him, and a double wedding is performed.

Siegfried takes Kriemhild home to his kingdom of Xanten, and Kriemhild is happy. But things go wrong when, just before he left, Gunther asked Siegfried to further subdue Brunhild, as she had grown weary of his company. He defeats her once more, hidden again by his magical cloak of invisibility. When Gunther invites them to come back, the two queens squabble over whose husband is mightier. It is then that Kriemhild makes the mistake of telling Brunhild

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<sup>45</sup> *The Nibelungenlied*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. Penguin Classics. Middlesex, UK. 1965. Print. Pg. 48.

<sup>46</sup> *The Nibelungenlied*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. Penguin Classics. Middlesex, UK. 1965. Print. Pg. 17.

that it was actually Siegfried who defeated her. Flying into a rage, Brunhild swears revenge.

Desperate to save Siegfried's life from a danger she knows is coming, Kriemhild goes to her brother's most trusted knight, Hagen, and tells him of Siegfried's one weakness, that he may protect it. But Hagen is not loyal. Working with Gunther, who is now supremely jealous of Siegfried's might and power over Brunhild, they decide to kill him. "Never should a man practice such monstrous treachery."<sup>47</sup>

Hagen himself murders Siegfried as they went out hunting. No one is more upset than Kriemhild, for she knows that his death was her own fault. "From the moment she learned of Siegfried's death she was the sworn enemy of her own happiness."<sup>48</sup> It is without delay that Kriemhild decides to take matters into her own hands.

She sends for King Etzel, and agrees to marry him, shocking everyone she knows. "And always- a thing that will hardly happen again- the Christian life and the heathen existed side by side."<sup>49</sup> By marrying herself to the most terrifying man in the world, Kriemhild shows her determination to get revenge. With the entire legion of Huns at her command, she sets her sight on her brother's kingdom.

When she meets again with Hagen, he simply derides her; he is not afraid of a woman. But soon he would learn that she was a woman to be feared. "Kriemhild heard all that Hagen said and with what savage enmity did she look him in the eyes!"<sup>50</sup> At her order, the war begins. The Huns battle with the Burgundians, in a battle so fierce it draws another great hero, Dietrich von Bern. Dietrich comes to aid Gunther, and is shocked by what he sees. At the end of the battle, no man is left standing.

Kriemhild finally beheads her brother, and confronts Hagen, telling him that he is next. But he tells her, "You have made an end as you desired, and things have run their course as I imagined."<sup>51</sup> She kills him as the flames consume the kingdom. Dietrich looks at the devastation,

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<sup>47</sup> *The Nibelungenlied*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. Penguin Classics. Middlesex, UK. 1965. Print. Pg. 123.

<sup>48</sup> *The Nibelungenlied*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. Penguin Classics. Middlesex, UK. 1965. Print. Pg. 133.

<sup>49</sup> *The Nibelungenlied*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. Penguin Classics. Middlesex, UK. 1965. Print. Pg. 170.

<sup>50</sup> *The Nibelungenlied*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. Penguin Classics. Middlesex, UK. 1965. Print. Pg. 231.

<sup>51</sup> *The Nibelungenlied*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. Penguin Classics. Middlesex, UK. 1965. Print. Pg. 290.

and weeps. He kills Kriemhild for what she had done, though the poem admits that it is far too late. And so the poem ends; "I cannot tell you what happened after this, except that knights and ladies, yes, and noble squires, too, were seen weeping there for the death of their friends."<sup>52</sup>

Kriemhild is an example of the perfect Medieval lady gone horribly wrong. She is beautiful, noble, and loyal. She loves her husband as any wife should; her fault is not that she loved. But in her grief, she forgets the love that is supposed to define her in other ways- her family, her lord, and even God himself. She marries herself to a murderer, for the sole purpose of getting revenge. And her revenge is bloody; it consumes the entire kingdom and hundreds of brave knights. When Dietrich at last confronts her, he is grieved that such a noble lady could have done such things. He puts her to death, ending her misery forever.

It can be plainly seen what kind of moral the poem is trying to get through. Love is what holds any society, especially Medieval society, together. The Medieval hero shows love, and is shown love in return. As does his lady, his friends, and his lord. All are expected to show love. And when they do not, they seal their fate, for when any man takes up the sword against his brother, death is not far away from either of them. Anger and hatred destroy a man, but love and kindness can save him. It is these stories that define this era; the noble knight fighting for his lord, facing all challenges to earn his loyalty and risking all dangers to prove his love. Be he a Viking Prince slaying a monster, a Persian soldier protecting his land, or a German princess devoting herself to the noblest of knights, the Medieval Hero is defined by how he loves, and how he chooses to show it.

## The Early Modern Period

(1600-1914)

The wellspring from which many of the most famous novels of all time are drawn, the Early Modern Period was an era of revolution as much as it was artistic. Beginning with the flourishing of knowledge in the Renaissance, continued in the explosion of scientific discovery of the Enlightenment, and reaching its height in the Romantic Era of the nineteenth century, this

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<sup>52</sup> *The Nibelungenlied*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. Penguin Classics. Middlesex, UK. 1965. Print. Pg. 291.

period was the culmination of millennia of literary and artistic thought coming together in an explosive mixture. The result was literature as a form in itself; no longer designed to express simply myths and old stories, but also to fuel the author's views on civilization, society, government, and culture.

As scholars discovered ancient Greek and Roman texts stashed away in monasteries, a great revival of Classical knowledge took place. Europe was changed forever by this rediscovery of philosophy and thought, and began its ascension into the modern nation-states we now see today. After the Protestant Reformation happened (concurrently and not necessarily unrelated), the Church's influence waned and secular power grew. Philosophy mixed with scientific discovery, and soon a new revolution swept across Europe; science and reason became the dominant force of politics and philosophical thought. During this time period, society was looked at through a scope that measured morality and goodness with reason and "natural law". Nature was looked at as almost a sovereign deity ruling alongside God himself, and was seen as a motherly figure that both cradled and ended life as she saw fit.

Revolutions took place at the end of the eighteenth century, which resulted in society reexamining itself and what it regarded as good. What emerged was a more natural look at the world; a view that man ought to be less domineering over the world that gave birth to him, and accept rather than overcome the difficulties she threw at him.

Literature and art followed suit. Authors wrote narratives that spoke of their views on the nature of society, often as a form of critique. They also viewed nature as a rather unmovable, unchallengeable *ding-an-sich* that exists whether people want it to or not. The moral of these stories was often that man may struggle against nature, but he will always lose.

### **I. Elizabeth Bennet**

It is of no surprise that author Jane Austen chose to begin her great work *Pride and Prejudice* with the statement of a well-known truth of the day: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."<sup>53</sup> By

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<sup>53</sup> Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Everyman's Library. New York, NY. 1991. Print. Pg. 1.

no means a revolutionary, Jane Austen was nevertheless an envelope-pusher in her day. Austen was (by modern eyes) a middle-class girl, with six siblings and little in the way of a promising future aside from getting married.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, Austen was a born writer, and, at the age of twenty-one, began work on what was to become her masterpiece: *First Impressions* (later to be titled *Pride and Prejudice*). It took many years to publish it, and many more years for it to be established as a classic, but since then it has been looked at as the defining novel of the age. Bridging the gap between the closing Enlightenment and the infant Romantic Era, *Pride and Prejudice* brings the former's natural laws and logic to meet the latter's emphasis on beauty and truth to create a story all readers can enjoy.

Centered around Miss Elizabeth (Eliza) Bennet, the book focuses on her unique standing in gentry England, surrounded by a demanding family and a future gravely in question (not unlike the author's herself). Eliza is the second eldest of a family of five children, all of whom are daughters. The story is very much a look at England's social designation of women, and while not necessarily an attack, it is still a revealing criticism of the Englishwoman's social standing. Eliza is a remarkably intelligent girl; her father remarks of her (his favorite) that she "has something more of a quickness than her sisters."<sup>55</sup> Eliza is the only one that seems to see the silliness of everything around her, and is even more keenly aware of a certain gentleman that both despises and adores her.

One Mr. Darcy, an incredibly wealthy nobleman (of ten thousand pounds per year) is the other main character of the story. He is vain, condescending, and often downright cruel to people he sees as beneath him. Despite this, he is still drawn to her beauty, and, perhaps more importantly, to her intelligence and self-reliability (some things women were thought of in those days as not possessing).

Meeting at a party, Elizabeth only puts up with Darcy because her older sister Jane is attracted to Mr. Bingley, Darcy's friend. As Jane's relationship with Bingley grows, Elizabeth spends more and more time around them and Darcy. However, things change as Mr. Bennet's

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<sup>54</sup> Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Everyman's Library. New York, NY. 1991. Print. Pg. xxxii.

<sup>55</sup> Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Everyman's Library. New York, NY. 1991. Print. Pg. 3.

cousin Mr. Collins comes to stay. A priest in the favor of one Lady Catherine de Bourgh (whom he never fails to mention every time he opens his mouth), Collins is himself looking for a wife.

In the meantime, Eliza meets one George Wickham, a soldier with an unfortunate connection with Darcy. Wickham happens to be the former godson of Darcy's father, and, after falling out of favor with Darcy himself, was cast out of the house.

"I had not thought Mr. Darcy so bad as this- though I have never liked him, I had not thought so very ill of him- I had supposed him to be despising his fellow creatures in general, but did not suspect him of descending to such malicious revenge, such injustice, such inhumanity as this!"<sup>56</sup>

Keeping with the darkened mood she had possessed from her talk with Wickham, Eliza is then confronted with a difficult decision: Mr. Collins asks for her hand in marriage. Despite the fact that Collins is the next in line for Mr. Bennet's estate, and the simple fact that, at Bennet's death, he could throw them all out of the house as he chooses, Eliza gives him a solid 'no', and even puts in a bit of mockery;

"Really, Mr. Collins...you puzzle me exceedingly. If what I have hitherto said can appear to you in the form of encouragement, I know not how to express my refusal in such a way as may convince you of its being one."<sup>57</sup>

With the approval of her father and the disapproval of her mother, Eliza shows herself to be a strong and defiant woman who stands up for herself. Her defiance continues to grow after she learns that Bingley has broken up with Jane. She begins to feel alone after her best friend Charlotte Lucas marries Collins, leaving her confused as to what she should have done. Her frustration, however, reaches an apex when she discovers that Darcy persuaded Bingley to break up with Jane. It is to her surprise nonetheless, what happens next.

Not too long after this discovery, Darcy comes to her, and with many references to how degrading it is to be talking with her, and so beneath him it is to be doing such a thing, proposes marriage to her. Elizabeth replies furiously. She lets loose with her anger about his treatment of Wickham and his involvement in Bingley's decision to leave Jane.

"From the very beginning, from the first moment, I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of

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<sup>56</sup> Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Everyman's Library. New York, NY. 1991. Print. Pg. 75-76.

<sup>57</sup> Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Everyman's Library. New York, NY. 1991. Print. Pg. 103.

the feelings of others, were such as to form that ground-work of disapprobation...and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed upon to marry."<sup>58</sup>

Speechless, Darcy leaves. Hardly satisfied with defeating one of the most powerful men in England, Eliza is greatly distressed about her decision. Afterwards, she gets a letter from Darcy that gives explanation for his actions. He told Bingley to break up with Jane because he was afraid she did not love him. As for Wickham, Darcy tells her the truth: Wickham was a spendthrift who wasted his inheritance and then attempted to elope with Darcy's sister. Aware of her own prejudices (a fantastic use of irony), Elizabeth begins to worry over her choice.

A few months afterwards, Elizabeth and her aunt and uncle visit Pemberley, Darcy's home. Believing him to be elsewhere, Elizabeth is shocked to see him there. He is equally shocked, but responds in a manner Elizabeth had not thought possible. He treats her kindly and gently, and even introduces her to his sister. Their meeting is cut short, however, by the knowledge that Wickham has eloped with Elizabeth's youngest sister, Lydia.

Their entire family's reputation on the line, the Bennets are in despair over Lydia's elopement. It is of course to their great relief that Wickham and Lydia's marriage is announced. After the wedding, Elizabeth discovers via letter from her aunt that Darcy had taken care of the wedding, and forced Wickham to comply. Realizing that she was wrong, Elizabeth finally changes her mind about Darcy, knowing that he had done it for her.

Bingley returns and proposes to Jane, who accepts. Elizabeth is very happy for her, and not even an abrupt arrival of Lady Catherine herself could sully her mood. De Bourgh interrogates Elizabeth, believing that Darcy had proposed to her. Elizabeth, after refusing to allow Lady Catherine to bully her tells her that he had not, and she leaves. But Darcy does indeed come, and, pleased by her defiance to Lady Catherine, proposes again. She accepts, and happiness is gained by all.

Elizabeth is a proud and strong woman who knows what she wants. It is not hard to see that she was Austen's vehicle for communicating her thoughts on society and women's station in

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<sup>58</sup> Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Everyman's Library. New York, NY. 1991. Print. Pg. 182.

life. Her beauty and 'impertinence' were part of her charm. But, as Darcy himself admits, what draws him to her is "the liveliness of her mind".<sup>59</sup> This was the defining woman of Austen's philosophy. Both brilliant and willing to fight for what she believed in. Women would have a long struggle ahead to be recognized in the public and private spheres. But from this point on, they had a guide: Ms. Elizabeth Bennet (or Darcy, by the end of the book).

## II. The Monster

Not all literary heroes are human, however. Apparent in almost every story is the figure of "the monster". It stands as an impediment to the main character's life, and is often his enemy. Representing the worst of human nature, the monster is often a dark reflection of the hero himself (or herself). For Rama, Ravana is the cruel demon to his peacemaker. For Beowulf, Grendel is the spawn of evil to his noble, God-fearing warrior. The monster exists to define the hero.

But sometimes, it is the monster that is the true hero of the story. In these narratives, the monster is usually a pitiable creature who is made to do terrible things and thus appear more monstrous because of what the supposed "hero" of the story does. The monster in these cases is often a reminder for readers that what is on the outside is hardly ever what is on the inside. Outer ugliness is one thing, but inner ugliness is quite another.

In the early nineteenth century, as Romantic literature was taking off, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, noted poet and women's rights advocate, tackled this delicate concept in a way that had not been seen before. Inspired by the likes of Milton, Greek myths (especially of Prometheus), and Coleridge, (not to mention her own husband, Percy Shelley) she crafted a tale of Gothic horror and tragedy that told the tale of man's attempt to play God. This theme fit in well with the Romantic concept of nature being above man's attempts to conquer it, and the novel is often considered one of the finest examples of Romantic literature.

Called *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, the novel concerns a young Genovese doctor named Victor Frankenstein who is obsessed with life and death as concepts to be side-

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<sup>59</sup> Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Everyman's Library. New York, NY. 1991. Print. Pg. 359.

stepped. Working secretly with pieces of various corpses, Frankenstein creates life out of death.

"His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing...but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips."<sup>60</sup>

To his great joy, the creature lives. But it is horrifying to look at, and Frankenstein flees, leaving it all alone. Not long after, Frankenstein's young brother is found murdered, and the maid hanged for it. Frankenstein is contacted by the murderer, who turns out to be the Monster himself. Now educated and capable of speaking both abstractly and philosophically, the Monster begs Frankenstein to hear his story, and what he ultimately wants.

"All men hate the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things!"<sup>61</sup> The monster tells Frankenstein of his as-yet short life. After Frankenstein fled, the Monster attempted to enter society, but was cast out because of his horrifying appearance. He asserts his inherent goodness: "Believe me, Frankenstein, I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love for humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone?"<sup>62</sup>

He ran to the wilderness, where he came upon a small cottage. He hid himself from the family inside, but secretly collected firewood for them. Listening to the lessons taught to the young girl inside, he learns speech, history, religion, and human nature.

"Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle and at another as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike."<sup>63</sup>

During this time, he also finds a satchel of books, including Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and Goethe's *Sorrows of Werther*. He began to see himself as a variant of Adam, the first man, as laid out by Milton; just as man is the beautiful reflection of God's mercy and goodness, so he the Monster is a hideous reflection of man's fallen nature. When he finally decided to meet the family he had learned so much from, they reacted in horror, and fled. In

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<sup>60</sup> Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Lancer Books. New York, NY. 1968. Print. Pg. 86-87.

<sup>61</sup> Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Lancer Books. New York, NY. 1968. Print. Pg. 153.

<sup>62</sup> Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Lancer Books. New York, NY. 1968. Print. Pg. 155.

<sup>63</sup> Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Lancer Books. New York, NY. 1968. Print. Pg. 184.

anger, he burned down their cottage. With this, he began to hate his creator.

Tracking down Frankenstein's family, he murdered the doctor's young brother, and arranged for the nanny to be hanged for it. He then confronts Frankenstein, and makes his demand. "I am malicious because I am miserable."<sup>64</sup> He says, reminding Frankenstein that he is not his enemy. He demands that Frankenstein end his loneliness by making for him a female companion to love. He then leaves Frankenstein to his thoughts.

Frankenstein makes all the necessary measures to create the new being, but begins to regret his decision when he considers what the two would end up doing. He envisioned a hellish race spawned from their union that would dominate the earth. Because of this, he destroys the female creation before it is done. The Monster returns, and warns Frankenstein to keep working or destruction would follow. "Beware, for I am fearless, and therefore powerful." The Monster reminds him that such a being has nothing to lose, and that he will never escape him. But Frankenstein refuses.

The Monster then goes on to murder Frankenstein's father and fiancé. In anger, Frankenstein pursues the Monster across the world, ending up in the frozen North Atlantic above the Arctic Circle. There, dying, Frankenstein meets Captain Walton, whose introductory letters to his sister begins and ends the novel. He tells Walton his story, and then dies. Walton leaves to speak to his crew, but is shocked on returning to Frankenstein's cabin to see the monster sitting there, mourning.

"When I run over the frightful catalogue of my sins, I cannot believe that I am the same creature whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness. But it is even so; the fallen angel has become a malignant devil. Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am alone."<sup>65</sup>

Overcome with grief, the Monster leaves, vowing never again to disturb humanity. The last Walton and his men see of him is the breaking away of an ice raft, and his disappearance into the dark mists of frigid desolation.

It is no surprise that Shelley used Milton's Satan as a line by which her Monster is

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<sup>64</sup> Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Lancer Books. New York, NY. 1968. Print. Pg. 226.

<sup>65</sup> Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Lancer Books. New York, NY. 1968. Print. Pg. 346.

measured. Both are created to be beautiful and perfect, but fall from grace and result to more desperate means to gain back what they believe to be their perfection. Neither are successful, and are condemned to an eternity of endless misery because of their actions. Though he is a murderer, the Monster is a pitiable figure, one that has in him great love, but is denied love back simply because he is the reflection of man's savage nature. Just as man is the son of God, the Monster is the son of man, and his imperfection and doom are such because he could not rise above the fallibility that is apparent in his being. Shelley brought up the eternal question of 'who is the monster?', which, as literature would become more and more aware of itself, was to be the defining question of characterization. Whatever his sins, the Monster is not the villain in this story per se; he is the victim of the cruel joke that is life, and the product of a world that fancies itself far more virtuous than it is.

### **III. Natty Bumppo**

In 1776, the American colonies declared their independence from Britain and Europe itself. No longer would 'the European way' determine how Americans lived their lives. Born of natural law and self-evident truths, the new country rose out of the dust of the frontier to become a force of both literary and artistic achievement (to say nothing of political acumen). At first, European critics snubbed the idea of 'American literature', but soon they were overwhelmed with such geniuses as Washington Irving, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and James Fenimore Cooper. Cooper stands out as among the first of the American authors to be acclaimed in Europe. His tales of adventure and his razor-sharp social commentaries resonated well with the 'finer' tastes of Western criticism.

Cooper grew up in a young nation that already had much to speak of in terms of heroism and daring adventure. Drawing from his experiences and those of his ancestors, he constructed a tale that was uniquely American. Set during the French and Indian War in the mid eighteenth century, *The Last of the Mohicans* takes place in Cooper's home of New York. Bolstered by Romantic ideals and visions of the beauty and transcendence of nature, Cooper wrote the story of a colonial orphan who was raised by a kind chief of a diminishing tribe of Native Americans to

become the hero of both their worlds. And Natty is just that; he is the mightiest of men, forging his way through savage territory, unafraid of the dangers that await him. As a Romantic Hero, he is as noble as he is powerful, with respect to the Romantic virtue that righteousness is found in simplicity rather than through obedience to society.

"The frame of the white man, judging by such parts as were not concealed by his clothes, was like that of one who had known the hardships and exertion from his earliest youth. His person, though muscular, was rather attenuated than full; but every nerve and muscle appeared strung and indurated by unremitted exposure and toil."<sup>66</sup>

Natty works as a scout for the British, leading soldiers and civilians through New York's great forests. The novel begins with the Scots Colonel Munro and his two daughters, Cora and Alice being led by a Huron called Magua. They are on their way to Fort William Henry; Natty Bumppo and his adopted brother Uncas join them, and suspect that Magua is leading them to their deaths. Their suspicions are confirmed when Magua escapes, intending to bring French and Huron reinforcements. Magua and his men do indeed return, and capture the girls and their company. It is there that Magua falls in love with Cora, and demands she become his wife. But Natty and Uncas return and rescue them, taking them to a safe house on the way to the fort.

Natty leaves them there, going to Fort Edward for reinforcements. He is captured along the way by the French. Soon, the French General Montcalm speaks with Munro, and arranges for his surrender. He then treacherously orders the Indians to attack, and they slaughter the British soldiers. Magua again captures the girls, and takes them back to his village. Natty shows up, having gotten free of the French, and rescues Alice with the help of Munro and Alice's fiancé Duncan Heyward. But Magua will not be denied his claim.

Natty and Uncas go to the Delaware village, where Magua defends to Tamenund, sachem of the Delawares his right to Cora and the surviving British prisoners. Natty comes to argue, but Magua commands the floor.

"Magua was born a chief and a warrior among the red Hurons of the lakes; he saw the suns of twenty summers make the snow of twenty winters run off in the streams, before he saw the pale-face; and he was

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<sup>66</sup> Fenimore Cooper, James. *The Last of the Mohicans*. Barnes and Noble Classics. New York, NY. 2003. Print. Pg. 22.

happy! Then, his Canada fathers came into the woods, and taught him to drink the fire-water, and he became a rascal...The chief who was born a Huron, was at last a warrior among the Mohawks."<sup>67</sup>

In this way, Magua is very much Natty's opposite. While Natty was born into a white family, and raised to be a noble savage by Indians, Magua was raised a noble savage, but given the chance to exploit his desire for war by a white empire. Magua is a truly evil character; he kills and destroys without guilt. Whereas Natty is the perfect example of a virtuous man raised by benevolent nature herself, Magua is a cracked reflection of this. As Natty says, "When men struggle for the single life God has given them...even their own kind seem no more than the beasts of the wood."<sup>68</sup>

But Uncas replies that Natty is not a man to be overlooked. "We call him Hawkeye...for his sight never fails. The Mingos know him better by the death he gives their warriors; with them he is 'The Long Rifle'.<sup>69</sup> The Delawares know him well by his reputation. Tamenund frees the captives, but determines that Magua must have claim to Cora, and gives him a head start to get away. Natty, Uncas, Munro, Heyward, and the Delawares chase Magua into the mountains. The Hurons are defeated, but Magua kills Cora after she refuses him once more, and Uncas as he tries to save her. Attempting to escape, Magua falls to his death.

White men and Indians together hold a funeral for Cora and Uncas to celebrate their bravery. Natty speaks with Tamenund, who says,

"The pale-faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the redmen has not yet come again. The day has been too long. In the morning I saw the sons of Unamis happy and strong; and yet, before the night has come, have I lived to see the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohicans."<sup>70</sup>

In the world of Romantic literature, the hero does battle not just with the forces of darkness but also with the forces of 'civilized man'. Civilization corrupts man from his originally perfect *tabula rasa* persona, taking him away from Mother Nature, and putting his trust in the

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<sup>67</sup> Fenimore Cooper, James. *The Last of the Mohicans*. Barnes and Noble Classics. New York, NY. 2003. Print. Pg. 101-102.

<sup>68</sup> Fenimore Cooper, James. *The Last of the Mohicans*. Barnes and Noble Classics. New York, NY. 2003. Print. Pg. 41.

<sup>69</sup> Fenimore Cooper, James. *The Last of the Mohicans*. Barnes and Noble Classics. New York, NY. 2003. Print. Pg. 323.

<sup>70</sup> Fenimore Cooper, James. *The Last of the Mohicans*. Barnes and Noble Classics. New York, NY. 2003. Print. Pg. 364.

hands of imperfect, fallible mankind.

Indeed, society is an enemy, though certainly not the only one, and Natty fights his way around it rather than give into it. Cooper envisioned Natty as the quintessential American, the hardworking pioneer who worked alongside Mother Nature to carve out life and meaning from the ancient mark of creation itself. Civilization follows him but he pays no heed, for civilized man is not to his liking. "'Natur' is sadly abused by man, when he once gets the mastery."<sup>71</sup>

Natty is a master of his fate. He can do or be anything to accomplish the task. The lessons he learned from his Mohican father and brother and his knowledge of Christian morality and goodness make him into the perfect hero. He is a European (colonial), and knows and understands what is right and what is wrong. But unlike the "white man", he does not seek physical rewards. "...Hawkeye (Natty), stands strongly centered on what he doesn't need- not land, not money, not social prestige, not even love."<sup>72</sup>

In this way, Cooper predated Ralph Waldo Emerson, who would later write of trusting the self: "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist...Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world."<sup>73</sup> Natty is a man who solves his own problems. He lives and breathes efficiency; his unerring aim gave him the nickname "Hawkeye". He is faster, stronger, and wiser than his fellow man. He cares little for political minutia and petty social squabbles. To him the nature of man is laid bare, and on him is laid the responsibility of binding together the warring civilization and savagery in a way that preserves both. And though they clash repeatedly, Natty's faith in Nature as his guide is what sees him through to the end.

The Romantic Period was full of characters who would rather do what they know is right than simply listen to what society tells them. Civilization is itself a dodge, a trick that keeps men thinking that they are greater than they are. Man is a citizen of earth, and he does not have the

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<sup>71</sup> Fenimore Cooper, James. *The Last of the Mohicans*. Barnes and Noble Classics. New York, NY. 2003. Print. Pg. 122.

<sup>72</sup> Cooper, James Fennimore. *The Last of the Mohicans*. Barnes and Noble Classics. New York, NY. Print. Railton, Stephen. Intro. Pg. xxv.

<sup>73</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Simon and Schuster. New York, NY. 1965. Print. Pg. 243.

power to conquer it, be he the most powerful of all. Nature is his mother, his guide, and his grave, and the extent to which he gives her the credit for all these things determines how his life will end up. This era emphasized beauty and truth, and these truths are what define destiny in this literary world. Whether the character is an English socialite, a monster born of death, or an American frontiersman, all have the responsibility to do what they know is right.

## The Modern Era

(1914-)

In the mid nineteenth century, Europe was at its cultural zenith, with poetry and artistic achievement transcending all that had come before. Science was making new discoveries that were saving lives, countries were being born out of once independent states, and even the United States was healing from its horrible Civil War. But nothing would ever be the same after the world went to war against itself. The Great War changed the way many would look at reality, questioning the very issue of morality. Nature was no longer a nurturing mother; she was a cold and cruel mistress that laughed at the sufferings of her children. And God himself? The author of all such tragedy. As authoritarian regimes began to appear in the wake of the war, artistic expressing became something more akin to expressing the inner turmoil of the soul, and its inability to exist ideally in the real world. Indeed, in the real world, dreams could never come true.

As society itself began to change, so did literature. Novels became darker in mood and taste, and ended in morals that often did not make sense. Authors who challenged the old system were hailed as heroes, and the novel itself became a form of social expression. Authors like Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Greene used social mores and the realities of war and hardship to craft stories that were emblematic of their own times. The novels reflected a form of the gritty realism that had dominated the late nineteenth century, but did not seem to agree on what in fact was real and what was not. Indeed, the Modernist novel is not often very realistic, and instead uses metaphors and understood meanings to convey truths that the reader can fully appreciate. In

this way, Modernism was the movement of revealing the nature of man through allegory.

Most Modernist novels told of ordinary people that struggled against something, and failed to achieve it. Some novelists fought against this, desiring to return to the traditional narrative of heroes that transcended reality; they were not as successful. But as reading and writing became more available to the average person (an effect of greater communication and greater awareness for education), a different character rose out of the written word: The Pulp Hero. And its first champion: Robert E. Howard.

### **I. Conan the Barbarian**

A Texan born in an oil-town, Howard was raised in a frontier world that was fading from existence. He grew up reading voraciously, and was a loner by nature. He grew to love the concept of combat as a way of determining the fate of civilizations. Despite existing in the Modernist era, Howard very much lamented that he was not born in the Romantic nineteenth century. A Romantic by heart but a Modernist by practice, he forever changed literature by introducing characters that were part of both worlds.

Growing up, Howard was plagued by feelings of loneliness. Despite his talent for writing (or perhaps because of it) he found few friends, his only companions being his mother, his fiancé Novelyn Price, his mentor H.P. Lovecraft, and a few others in Lovecraft's circle. These feelings of loneliness drove Howard to devote himself to the study of how to make himself better; he extended this to his characters, a drive to be the best at everything. And so, after several powerful characters like sailor Steve Costigan, Puritan adventurer Solomon Kane, and Kull, the Exile of Atlantis, he finally settled on one that embodied all that he believed about life: Conan the Barbarian.

A Cimmerian of the fictional pre-historical "Hyborian Age", born on the battlefield, shaped by adversity, and pounded into shape by the hammer of his cruel god Crom, Conan is perhaps the greatest warrior in fictional history. Conan is, at some point in his life, a thief, a soldier, a mercenary, a general, a pirate captain, a leader of *kozaki* (Eastern nomadic warriors), and, eventually a king, all by his own will. He is a product of his author's savage and pessimistic

views on life. He gets what he wants by taking it, and daring anyone to stop him.

However, Conan is not a man without morals. He loves many women, but considers rape an abomination. "The ways of men vary in different lands, but a man need not be a swine, wherever he is."<sup>74</sup> Not simply a modernist writer, Howard was very much a romantic as well, working in what he loved about Kipling, Longfellow, Khayyam, Lamb, and Wilde. He had a realist side as well, also including men like Bierce and London in his influences. In this way, Conan is a mixture of both worlds, a figure standing in a cold, dark realist life, yet remaining a strong, proud citizen of nature itself, a perfect example of what a man could be if he only gave himself to adversity instead of civilized triviality. And there is little that Conan dislikes more than civilization. Howard himself despised the very concept of 'civilized men', being that those who call themselves civilized are often the true barbarians. A very romantic view of the world, this colored Howard's stories, and is heard most powerfully in his two greatest stories: "Beyond the Black River" and "Red Nails".

In "Beyond the Black River", the ancient empire of Aquilonia is expanding West into Pictish territory (it is not hard to draw a parallel of Aquilonia as the U.S. and the Picts as Native Americans). It follows a young Aquilonian soldier named Balthus, who comes upon Conan in the woods. He is quite shocked when he sees him.

"The other emerged dubiously and stared at the stranger. He felt curiously helpless and futile as he gazed on the proportions of the forest man- the massive iron-clad breast, and the arm that bore a reddened sword, burned dark by the sun and ridged and corded with muscles. He moved with the dangerous ease of a panther; he was too fiercely supple to be a product of civilization, even that fringe of civilization which composed the outer frontiers."<sup>75</sup>

It is clear that Howard is stating that civilization makes one soft, and if one is to be strong, they must exist apart from it. Even when he is compared to Aquilonian mercenaries of the above description, the difference is still uncanny. "They were wolves, but he was a tiger."<sup>76</sup> The

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<sup>74</sup> Howard, Robert E. "The Vale of Lost Women". *The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian*. Del Rey. New York, NY. 2003. Pg. 316.

<sup>75</sup> Howard, Robert E. "Beyond the Black River". *The Conquering Sword of Conan*. Del Rey. New York, NY. 2005. Print. Pg. 46.

<sup>76</sup> Howard, Robert E. "Beyond the Black River". *The Conquering Sword of Conan*. Del Rey. New York, NY. 2005. Print. Pg. 59.

Aquilonians ask him to help them fight the Picts, to which he grudgingly agrees. They go into the forest, but are captured by the Pictish leader, Zogar Sag, and slaughtered. Conan rescues Balthus (the only one left), and they retreat into the woods.

Conan tells Balthus of the Pictish god, Jhebbal Sag, a being that represented nature itself. The Picts fight to preserve their unity with the earth, however savagely they do so. They make it back to the fort, but it is now surrounded by Picts. Strengthened by Conan's words, Balthus decides to sacrifice himself to allow Conan to evacuate the fort. He charges into the howling Pictish ranks with a feral dog he met. Conan helps evacuate the women and children of the fort to safety. The Picts are defeated, and the battle is over.

Later on, in a tavern, a survivor finds Conan, and tells him of Balthus' death, his body surrounded by a mound of dead Picts. Impressed by the civilized man's courage, Conan announces that he will take ten Pictish heads for Balthus and seven for the dog. As Conan leaves, the man says what is to be perhaps Howard's greatest and most defining quote: "Barbarism is the natural state of mankind...Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must ultimately triumph."<sup>77</sup>

In the last of the Conan stories, "Red Nails", Howard talks about civilization again. While traveling in a desert land, Conan comes across the female mercenary Valeria. After being attacked by a "dragon" (really a resurrected dinosaur), he kills it with a poisoned spear. They come to an ancient city resembling Mesoamerican culture, and are thrust into the middle of a brutal tribal war. Meeting Prince Olmec, ruler of the Teculhti tribe, and Tascela, a sorceress. He tells them about how a slave named Tolkemec tricked the two tribes, the Teculhti and the Xotalanc into going to war with each other after one stole the bride of another. He shows them red nails hammered into a pillar, representing the number of enemies killed. "Anger and resentment blossomed into bloodshed and rape and murder. Once the sword was drawn there was no turning back, for blood called for blood, and vengeance followed swift on the heels of atrocity."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Howard, Robert E. "Beyond the Black River". *The Conquering Sword of Conan*. Del Rey. New York, NY. 2005. Print. Pg. 100.

The Xotalanc came back, and Conan and Valeria help defeat them. But Olmec then betrays them, and sends for Conan to be killed. But Tascela imprisons him, and takes Valeria to drain her of her vitality. Tascela is revealed to have been the stolen bride, and had caused, along with Tolkemec, the tribes to go to war. But Conan bursts in, having killed Olmec, and frees Valeria. But Tolkemec, now an ancient and mad sorcerer, appears, and Conan kills him and Tascala. Conan is, for once, tired of slaying. "Well, this cleans up the feud." he says. "It's been a hell of a night! Where did these people keep their food? I'm hungry."<sup>79</sup>

"Red Nails" is very much about the decline of civilized society. Even seemingly perfect ones have their unspoken hatreds, and, for this one, it ultimately destroyed them. The Tecuhtli and the Tolkemec hated each other too much to think about anything other than war. Howard believed very strongly that, when a civilization is reduced to basic desires (violence, sex, food), it is not long for death. Indeed, such a society deserves to die, for it has betrayed its own values that once made it great.

Howard did not live long after this, and, after his mother entered a coma, he killed himself out of despair. Howard was a man out of time, and was never satisfied with the period he was born in. A warrior stuck in the Texas oil fields, he could not come to terms with the fact that he could never be as free as his characters. Conan is perhaps his greatest legacy, the vision of a man who saw society's hypocrisy, and chose not to be a part of it any longer. Howard is Conan and Conan is Howard; they are inextricably linked. Conan is Howard as he wished to be, free from the constraints of a people too caught up in frivolities to see the truth of their predicament.

## II. Sethe

One of the ways of shattering a Romantic view of the world is bringing up that it is not quite the ideal world the author claims it to be. Modernist stories often focus on darker periods of history, or, rather, the dark side of perceived good times. While Modernism cannot be defined as easily as Romance, it is very clear that the reason it exists is to question what came before, and invent newer ways of looking at the past. Heroes may not truly be heroes anymore; indeed,

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<sup>78</sup> Howard, Robert E. "Red Nails". *The Conquering Sword of Conan*. Del Rey. New York, NY. 2005. Print. Pg. 247.

<sup>79</sup> Howard, Robert E. "Red Nails". *The Conquering Sword of Conan*. Del Rey. New York, NY. 2005. Print. Pg. 281.

they could actually be the villains of the story (Kriemhilde, perhaps?).

With her 1987 book *Beloved*, Toni Morrison explored one of the darkest periods of American history, and developed a narrative around an adaption of a very famous historical character. Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave from the South, murdered one of her children (and attempted to murder the rest) to keep them from being pulled back into slavery. Morrison said of her: "She was certainly single-minded and, judging by her comments, she had the intellect, the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom."<sup>80</sup>

From Garner's story came a powerful question. What would you do to protect those you love? Most people would be shocked at Garner's story. The one person not shocked, however, was Garner herself. Refusing to repent for the murder, she set an example (a dark one, at that) for those who wished to be free of slavery. From this came a rallying cry for abolitionists- freedom at all costs. The American Civil War followed not too long after that. And, as the country lay in ruins, the future for many lay in similar desolation.

Morrison set her book in 1873, eight years after the end of the Civil War. Though slavery was over, the slaves were still not free per se. They faced many dangers, from their tragic past and from their uncertain future. Trapped in this Limbo of misery, comes Morrison's character Sethe. An adaption in more than one way of Garner, Sethe is a former slave who murdered her daughter to save herself from being pulled back to "Sweet Home", her old plantation.

The story begins with a regard to the past. Sethe's house is haunted by a vengeful spirit, driving her sons away and ensuring their continued misery. It is not entirely a mystery who the spirit is- Sethe believes it to be the ghost of her dead daughter, returning to harass her murderer. Things change when Paul D comes to live with them. One of Sethe's fellow slaves, Paul D is a rather calming soul who comes to love Sethe.

"Not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. There was something blessed in his manner."<sup>81</sup>

Paul D has much to deal with at this house. Sethe barely allows herself to think. Her

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<sup>80</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books. New York, NY. 1987. Print. Foreword. Pg. XVII.

<sup>81</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books. New York, NY. 1987. Print. Pg. 20.

memory is plagued with visions of the past, and she is unable to escape from her guilt. Paul D's care, however, eases her thoughts, however, and things start to get better. But everything changes when they return to the house after a time away, they meet the mysterious woman named Beloved.

"Instead she gazed at Sethe with sleepy eyes. Poorly fed, thought Sethe, and younger than her clothes suggested- good lace at the throat, and a rich women's hat. Her skin was flawless except for three vertical scratches on her forehead so fine and thin they seemed at first like hair, baby hair before it bloomed and roped into the masses of black yarn under her hat."<sup>82</sup>

Against Paul D's wishes, Sethe brings her into her house. Paul D is eventually forced out as Beloved becomes Sethe's priority. But Beloved meets with Paul D, and tells him a little bit about why she is there. "I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me by my name."<sup>83</sup> It seems that what Beloved is asking for is that Sethe will recognize her. Not realizing Sethe's action years ago, he tells her that Sethe loves her. "She don't love me like I love her. I don't love nobody but her."<sup>84</sup>

Later on, Paul D confronts Sethe about what happened, and she tells him. On the run from her former owner, Sethe took her children to a shed, and tried to murder them. She only succeeded in killing one, drawing a saw across her neck. "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe."<sup>85</sup> Horrified, Paul D leaves, and Sethe is plunged back into her old depression.

As the days go on, Sethe devotes herself to pleasing Beloved, who she now believes is the ghost of her daughter. Beloved becomes angry whenever Sethe fails to give her what she wants, rather like a spoiled child. She only says, "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing."<sup>86</sup>

Her youngest daughter, Denver, begins to see her mother's plight, and looks for help amongst the community. The white man who gave them the house comes by to take Denver to her new job, but Sethe, overcome by frustration and not knowing the reason for his visit, attacks

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<sup>82</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books. New York, NY. 1987. Print. Pg. 62.

<sup>83</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books. New York, NY. 1987. Print. Pg. 137.

<sup>84</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books. New York, NY. 1987. Print. Pg. 137.

<sup>85</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books. New York, NY. 1987. Print. Pg. 193.

<sup>86</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books. New York, NY. 1987. Print. Pg. 236.

him. As the feelings of rage and confusing boil up in Sethe's mind, she sees her master "coming back for her". The feelings she had all those years ago return, and Beloved disappears. But Sethe is not assuaged. She is inconsolable until Paul D comes back. She tells him that Denver, her "best thing" is now gone, and she has nothing. But, as the book ends, Paul D tells her, "You your best thing, Sethe. You are."<sup>87</sup> Morrison closes the story by repeating the phrase, "It was not a story to pass on."<sup>88</sup>

Sethe's story is one of profound tragedy. It would not be a fallacy to say that she is her own enemy. Beloved is very much her creation, her building up of the guilt that was destroying her. She refused to come to terms with it, only showing a 'what's done is done' attitude.

Ironically, by denying her feelings, she is denying herself the love she thinks she needs. Her fear defines her, and it is her fear of losing what she loves that drives her to almost starve herself to please Beloved. She is unaware that she is simply feeding her feelings of regret and guilt. And when her daughter is leaving, those emotions burst out as she lashes out against her daughter's employer.

However, the story shows that love can heal all wounds. Paul D saves Sethe with his love, and she is, in a way, 'freed' from her guilt. In this way, Sethe represents a perfect example of the Modernist hero. She is defined by her mistakes, and is nearly destroyed by them. But, by coming to terms with her faults, and by seeking love from a source outside of herself, her conflict is resolved and she finds happiness again. While most Modern heroes do not necessarily have happy endings, Sethe shows the potential for such. Sethe's story is an inspiring, if cautious one, warning readers not to let the bad things in life define them.

### **III. Harry Potter**

Perhaps the climax of the Modernist tale is the introduction of a tragic hero, born in adversity, who rises to the top, only to fail at the end. Modernist truth holds that there can be no true 'happy ending', because such endings are not realistic. But not all modern stories hold to this belief. Many of these authors, for the purposes of making a story that will end in such a way as to

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<sup>87</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books. New York, NY. 1987. Print. Pg. 322.

<sup>88</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books. New York, NY. 1987. Print. Pg. 323.

please the average reader, choose to tell a more realistic tale while at the same time incorporating elements of the Romantic and even Medieval chivalric. This form of novel has largely replaced the traditional modernist narrative, given that people in this day and age generally prefer happy endings. Nevertheless, this new literary character is not spared a whiff of the tragedies that come his way.

Every era needs a literary champion; an author whose books define the period in which they live. The early nineteenth century was dominated by James Fenimore Cooper, and the twenties and thirties were ruled by Ernest Hemingway. But the hero of the twenty-first century is not so easy to identify. The turn of the millennium has inspired a literary explosion, and no longer can one character stand for all others. Nevertheless, the best fit for such a description is none other than Harry James Potter.

It is hard to find a literary character more widely read these days, or studied by so many academics. J.K. Rowling's sweet, caring young 'boy who lived' has become the very line by which new millennium characters are judged by. Harry, a young English wizard, orphan, and slayer of evil (in a way), is very much the late 90s and early 2000s heroic standard, and exemplifies much of the morality that has held these days. Perhaps the ultimate Modernist Hero, Harry is rather a combination of everything that has come before him. He is clearly inspired by the Romantic Hero, but is firmly rooted in gritty realism that gets more intense as the book series goes on. Rowling, an author who jumped out onto the stage from obscurity, has now become a spokesperson for the modern age. Harry stands as a character for the ages, one that took an extraordinary person to develop.

Harry James Potter was born the son of James and Lilly Potter, a British witch and wizard couple. Rowling establishes that witches and wizards live around 'normal' folk, or 'muggles', yet the two try to stay separate. Harry's parents were murdered by an evil wizard, Lord Voldemort, an equally interesting character whose backstory is elaborated on later. Harry is brought up by his mother's muggle sister Petunia, her stick-in-the-mud husband Vernon Dursely, and their corpulent, greedy son Dudley. Harry is cruelly mistreated by his aunt, uncle, and

cousin, and is raised without knowledge of his arcane background.

Harry is a kind boy, despite his upbringing, and always means well.

"Harry had a thin face, knobby knees, black hair, and bright green eyes. He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him in the nose. The only thing Harry liked about his appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning."<sup>89</sup>

Harry stands against his fat uncle and cousin and bony aunt in more ways than one. They are cold and 'rational' people, who refuse to believe in magic. But when they are contacted by Professor Albus Dumbledore of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, it is the dawning of a new era. At first they refuse to let Harry know, and are forced to move when the letters keep coming.

Eventually, Dumbledore sends the half-giant Rubeus Hagrid to find him on his eleventh birthday. A gentle giant who had cared for Harry immediately after his parents' death, Hagrid comes and tells Harry about his magical background, prompting Petunia to spill to Harry all she knew about her sister.

"How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that-that *school*- and came back home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was- a freak!"<sup>90</sup>

Harry is floored by the knowledge, but, considering that he would get to leave them for most days out of the year to go to a school for people like him, he accepts. Hagrid takes him through a magical wall in London to the hidden Diagon Alley, where he is given his inheritance from his parents resting in Gringotts Wizarding Bank. They buy equipment for him, including a snow-white owl he names Hedwig. After some preparation, they set off for Hogwarts.

It is at train station 9<sup>3/4</sup> that Harry meets his future best friend, Ron Weasley of the red-haired wizarding Weasley dynasty. On the train, the two encounter the third member of their group, the brilliant but socially awkward and fact-spewing Hermione Granger. They arrive at Hogwarts, an old castle converted into a school for wizards and witches. There they meet one of their future antagonists, Draco Malfoy, whom Harry quickly becomes enemies with.

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<sup>89</sup> Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Scholastic, Inc. New York, NY. 1997. Print. Pg. 20.

<sup>90</sup> Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Scholastic, Inc. New York, NY. 1997. Print. Pg. 53.

Harry grows to love his classes, but is angered by the brooding and dark-robed Professor Severus Snape, who seems to hate Harry from the beginning. Nevertheless, Harry becomes a skilled player of Quidditch, a sport in which players fly around on brooms that is somewhat reminiscent of hockey and rugby, and which his father James was the school's star player.

However, things go wrong when they discover a massive three-headed dog guarding a trap door, and conclude that Snape is trying to get through it. Their suspicions are rather confirmed when it seems that, during Quidditch, Snape is attempting to curse Harry. They tell only Hagrid of their suspicions, who simply assures them that Snape has Dumbledore's trust.

In the meantime, readers encounter what is one of the most touching moments in the series: Harry finds the Mirror of Erised, in which the viewer sees his heart's desire reflected on him. Harry sees his parents looking at him. Dumbledore comes to see him, and tells him about it. He warns Harry not to dwell on dreams, for men have died hoping for fiction to become reality.

Finally, Harry, Ron, and Hermione, convinced that Snape is going to make the theft of what Hagrid accidentally tells them is the Philosopher's Stone, spring into action. They get through the trap door, only to encounter obstacles that require knowledge that each one has a chance to solve. Harry goes on alone into the final room, where he meets Professor Quirell, who had been their Dark Art's Defense teacher. He tells to Harry that he had been the one trying to kill him, and that Snape was trying to protect him. Quirrell reveals that what is left of Voldemort is manifested on the back of his head. Voldemort demands Harry give him the stone, and when he refuses, has Quirrell attack him. On touching Harry, however, he melts away into dust. Harry then passes out.

He awakens in the school's infirmary, where Dumbledore tells him why Quirrell died when he touched him. When Voldemort killed Lilly and James Potter, Lilly's last wish was to protect her child. As she died, her love formed a shield that reflected Voldemort's spell back on himself, saving Harry's life, but leaving him with the scar. Dumbledore then tells Harry that love is the strongest magic of all.

Harry goes on to have many more adventures with his friends. In the course of the series,

Voldemort is reborn, and sets to work scheming to conquer the world. Harry discovers similarities between their upbringing, and wonders what he, Tom Riddle, would have been like had things gone differently. They find that Voldemort made himself nearly unkillable by dividing his soul into seven 'horcruxes', everyday objects that can house a person's soul and thus keep them immortal. Dumbledore instructs Harry to find and destroy these objects, but is tragically killed by Snape, long suspected by Harry of having been working with Riddle.

Harry also discovers the legend of the Deathly Hallows, objects that, when combined, make one the Master of Death. Riddle has one, the Elder Wand, and Harry another, the Cloak of Invisibility. Harry spends the majority of the final book destroying the rest of the horcruxes, leading to a massive final battle at the school. After Snape was killed by Riddle, Harry finds him, and he, through his memories, tells Harry everything.

Snape had loved Lilly Potter, but was frustrated when she chose his bully, James Potter, as her love. This drove him to join Riddle, though Dumbledore helped him get free. Dumbledore assigned him to protect Harry after Lilly's death, asking for him to think of her. "You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lilly's son."<sup>91</sup> Through the memories, Harry discovered that he is the last horcrux, as, when Riddle's spell bounced off, part of Riddle's soul attached itself to him. Harry then goes willingly to Riddle, who 'kills him'.

Harry meets Dumbledore in a mysterious 'transition land', and is told he can either stay or go back. After a few words, Harry does go back, and renews the battle. But even as they fight, Harry refuses to kill Riddle, not wanting to stoop to his level. In an ironic twist, Riddle again destroys himself, his curse bouncing off Harry's disarming spell cast in justice, not hate.

Harry is the new millennium's hero. He is powerful, but not bloodthirsty. He is compassionate, but not perfect. He is an orphan, yet he knows love. Like Gilgamesh, he is something of a godlike figure, if only a god in 21st century terms- master of his actions and place in the world. In such a Nietzschean assessment, one would conclude that he is the culmination of modern literature. Harry is very much an everyman figure, and is able to do great

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<sup>91</sup> Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Scholastic, Inc. New York, NY. 200Y. Print. Pg. 679.

things, not because he is extraordinary (which he is), but because he trusts in himself. In the end, love is what saves him; it is what drives him forward. His example is an inspiration to many.<sup>92</sup> What more can any literary hero hope for than to be an inspiration in the real world itself?

## CONCLUSION

In John Milius' 1982 film *Conan the Barbarian*, the villain, Thulsa Doom (James Earl Jones), speaks to the title character about 'the Riddle of Steel'. "Steel isn't strong, boy. Flesh is stronger." He motions to a girl on a cliff high above. He commands her to jump off, and she obeys, dying in the process. Doom then turns back to Conan. "*That* is strength, boy. *That* is power. The strength and power of flesh. What is steel compared to the hand that wields it?"<sup>93</sup>

Doom, a wizard and cult leader, knows well the power the hearts of man can give him. What he says is perhaps the greatest truth of the hero: his strength does not come from any weapon or device he uses, but from his own will- the 'Will to Power', as Nietzsche called it. Heroes are measured by the obstacles they overcome, and how well they are able to move beyond such hindrances. We call a character strong when he or she is shown to be able to brave the dangers posed by life and emerge, if not unscathed, then still standing. Joseph Campbell wrote: "The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle his personal and local limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms."<sup>94</sup>

Since man began to record his stories, the heroes of such tales are always representative of the best such a society has to offer; in a world that values strength, they are strongest, in one that values cleverness, they are the wisest, in one that values humility, and they are the meekest of all. Even a character like Harry Potter, who, by all descriptions is an ordinary boy (in a magical world), being mediocre at spells and schoolwork, he is, nevertheless, the most

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<sup>92</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/harry-potter/11015674/J-K-Rowling-sends-Dumbledore-letter-to-Texas-shooting-survivor-Cassidy-Stay.html>

<sup>93</sup> *Conan the Barbarian*. Directed by John Milius, performances by Arnold Schwarzenegger, James Earl Jones, Sandahl Bergman, Universal (North America), 20th Century Fox (International), 1982.

<sup>94</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Princeton University Press. 2008. Print. Pg. 14.

compassionate. In Rowling's world, love is the most powerful magic of all, and thus it follows that Harry, being a person who puts compassion and love before violence and revenge, is the one person who can bring the world from darkness back into the light. That is why he, and not Hermione or Dumbledore, is the 'chosen one'.

The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, himself wrote about what makes a hero. To him, the hero is beyond good and evil; this person is strong, and that is what defines him. "It is not the strength but the duration of exalted sensations which makes exalted men."<sup>95</sup> Nietzsche believed very strongly that hard times shape the man, and forge him into a being of unparalleled might. This new man, the 'Übermensch', who is not bound by any chains of morality or meekness; he is the 'lightning' and the 'madness'.<sup>96</sup>

Is it true that heroes are made by shunning morality rather than serving it? In other words, are heroes such because they serve their society or go beyond it? That question can be answered with another question; Is life itself a battle to be won, or a reality to be felt and experienced? Philosophers have thought over this question for thousands of years. As they have developed, so too has the literary hero grown up around them.

In ancient Mesopotamia, life was built around service to the gods; to reject them was to consign yourself to oblivion. Kings were appointed by the gods, and from birth to death you lived to obey them. In cultures like Greece, life was a continuous battle of mortal vs immortal; that is, man struggled against the forces nature (the gods) put before him, and he always failed. He did not fail because he was weak- surely, no one was stronger than Achilles- but because he could never be more than just a man. Even Rama, India's majestic god-king, who was perfect in almost every way, fell victim to the very human fault of jealousy. Whether they are Gilgamesh, Achilles, or Rama, the heroes of the ancient world were weighed down by their natures, god or not.

Things changed in the Middle Ages. Life concerned service to your lord, both human and divine. Society valued those who loved and were loved, those who sacrificed to give

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<sup>95</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Penguin Books. New York, NY. 2003. Print. Pg. 91.

<sup>96</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Penguin Books. New York, NY. 2003. Print. Pg. 43.

glory to God and King. Beowulf was the perfect example of the character who sacrifices all to honor fealty to his lords, both man and God. For the Warrior King, it is not the violence inherent in his responsibilities that defines them, but his duty to protect those under him. Who is Rostam but a defender of his people, a soldier for God and a shield for the needy? A true warrior, as the Medieval tradition tells us, is the one who gives up all he knows to honor those he was born to serve. Those who do not remain loyal, those who break the bonds of loyalty they swore to serve are never free from the punishment that awaits them. Even Kriemhilde, broken over the loss of her husband, nevertheless became the incarnation of raging vengeance, dooming her forever in the eyes of those under God.

As the Medieval world gave way to the era of Romance, the characters became no less loyal. However, as views of personal responsibility and self-reliance came about, that loyalty was directed more towards the individual. Characters like Elizabeth Bennet thought for themselves, and this is perhaps the greatest legacy of this era. Characters who understand their place in the world, and do not try to fight it are the kings of destiny. Those like Natty Bumppo are the sign to others that in a world full of darkness and danger, our greatest hope of making it through is trusting ourselves. And though characters like Frankenstein's Monster would ultimately fail, it is their stories that tell us of the necessity of knowing oneself and being one's own master. As time moved on, the old story of the futile hero became more and more a distant sound in the wind.

But darkness is still a reality, and mankind has gone through many great trials and tragedies on his way to modernity. It could be said that the old hero born of gods and thunder is obsolete, at least in the view of modern critics. The hero of today is one who fights not only against his enemies but also against himself. Characters burdened by tragedy, like Sethe and Harry Potter rise above their pasts by accepting the fact that only they can steer themselves back to light. They understand that, while they are still weak as mortals, but they have a responsibility, just like the knights of old, to be true to themselves. Characters like Conan are mighty not just because of their muscle mass, but because they chose to be strong when it counted. Conan knows

who he is, and that is what makes him powerful.

These days, the person who is compassionate and peaceful is valued; the person who sees the world for what it is, dark and cruel, yet manages to love it all the same, is the one is destined to save it. Joseph Campbell wrote: "Modern literature is devoted, in great measure, to a courageous, open-eyed observation of the sickeningly broken figurations that abound before us, around us, and within."<sup>97</sup>

If being a hero these days means seeing the reality of tragedy, then it also means not letting such tragedy define you. The modern hero is mired in misfortune, but somehow finds a way to rise above it. They reach a catharsis, and, while not always happy, such an ending is designed to be a resolution of his or her character, the closing of their story.

"The happy ending of the fairy tale, the myth, and the divine comedy of the soul is to be read, not as a contradiction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man."<sup>98</sup>

In this way, stories, and even literature itself, is the preservation of the truths of mankind, the record of the eternal struggle we have had with life itself, and how the greatest minds of all time have come together to teach us how to go on. Literature is more than just art, it is the retelling of everything that has made us great, our battles, our tragedies, our secrets, that have come together to make us into what we are today.

Whether the hero be strong and proud, clever and perceiving, meek and kind-hearted, he or she is the culmination of thousands of years of human development. They represent the values of man, that have existed for as long as we have. The hero is the person we want to be, what we would be if things had been different. But, as Joseph Campbell shows, fiction and literature transcends reality to show us a world in which our principles and desires take center stage, and show us what it means to live in a place where our dreams can come true. I believe that the hero, while he or she does change over time, still represents the same character: the universal protector of our hearts and minds, the warrior of our souls, and the champion of us all. Simply open a book, and you will find inside it a person who is all these things, and possibly more. Everyone

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<sup>97</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Princeton University Press. 2008. Print. Pg. 20.

<sup>98</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Princeton University Press. 2008. Print. Pg. 21.

has a story to tell, and everyone has a hero within them that represents everything our predecessors have fought so hard to defend.

## I.

"So, when you factor  $3x + y...$ " said Mr. Morris, math teacher of Columbus Central High School. Most of the students thought he was boring. Only one didn't, and that was because he wasn't paying attention. One Charlie Kyle, sixteen, was staring at something else. The blonde girl ahead of him, Mary Dean, was twirling her hair with her finger, a dull look on her face. Charlie couldn't see that; not that he could even if he had been looking at her. She was the kind of girl with a face that guys would fight over. She was not the kind of person who enjoyed those fights, though Charlie would have fought a thousand battles if they would win her over.

Charlie was caught in his trance when the bell made him jump. "All right, all right." said Mr. Morris. "Settle down. Hand in last night's worksheet." Charlie looked around and blinked. He fished around in his backpack, and took out the sheet. "What did you get for number six?" He looked up. Mary was looking at him with these blue eyes that almost saw through him. "Oh, uh, fourteen." "Thanks!" She scribbled out the answer on her sheet with a pink pen. "You know, I just can't do math." she said. "Numbers give me such a headache." "You know, I could tutor you..." He was cut off by Thunk, the football player, who was probably too old for high school, plowing through the aisles like a tank. Mary didn't notice, as another boy had begun a conversation with her. There was always something that kept him from talking to her.

He dropped off the sheet and walked down the hall, fuming. "Stupid Thunk. Stupid math." He bumped into the boy from earlier. His name was Caden Clear. And he was not the nicest of characters. "What do you want, twip?" he said. Caden was probably the most well known boy in school. This is not to say that the school knew he was as rotten as he was arrogant. Caden looked around. "I saw you talking to Mary. I'm gonna tell you something right now. Stay away from her. She doesn't belong around shrimps like you." He gave Charlie a shove against

the wall. "Do your body a favor and stay away from my girl. Comprende?" Charlie glared at him. "Huh?" "Step aside." Charlie whispered. "Oh, now you're ogling my girl, and giving me lip?" He slapped Charlie across the cheek. "I'll fix that. But not now. I'm gonna be late for Bio. Later, twip." He walked away. Charlie felt like he was ready to explode.

Charlie slunk into English class. He was almost too angry to notice class begin. "Good afternoon." said Mrs. Paul, a short middle-aged woman with round spectacles. "Please take out your textbooks, and open to page sixty-four. Charlie absent-mindedly obeyed. Sitting on the page was an ancient carving of Gilgamesh, the Sumerian god-king. In his hand, he held what appeared to be a whip, which he was using to strike a monster. "I wish I had one of those." Charlie thought. "I could knock that lousy Caden into next week." "Mr. Kyle." said Mrs. Paul. "Would you be so kind as to tell the class what the name of Gilgamesh's mother was?" It just came to him that he had not done the reading. "Uhhh, I..." She rolled her eyes. "Mr. Fitz, same question."

Charlie zoned out again, more transfixed with the picture than ever. The caption read, "Gilgamesh Slaying Humbaba". Humbaba was the monster, apparently. It was big and ugly, and Charlie could almost smell its stench. Probably smelled worse than Thunk. But what really caught his eye was the hero himself. His muscles were huge, almost too big for a person. The page said that he was two-thirds god and one third man. Despite this, Charlie felt a connection to him, this 4500 year-old warrior and the sixteen year-old student. "You never had problems." said Charlie. "You just whipped them, didn't you? Bet you always got the girls. Lots of them. But I just want one." He sighed. "Any tips?" The page was, of course, silent. He closed it. "Some help you are."

After class, he walked out into the hall, still asking questions in his head. Then, he saw Mary standing at her locker, talking to Caden. Instantly, he got mad again. It was then that he began to zone out once more.

He looked around. Before him were the forests of ancient Babylon. He saw his reflection in a nearby pool. He was dressed in armor, and even had the Mesopotamian cylindrical beard. "Huh..." He heard a snort, and looked to the side. The creature from the story stood ten yards

away from him, in between Charlie and a huge cedar. Chained to the cedar was Mary, in full princess regalia. She looked very worried. Charlie looked back at the monster. It was shaped like a huge bull, with a face that looked rather like Caden's. "I get it." said Charlie, with a smile. The Caden monster charged at him. He ran towards it, the ground rumbling.

He caught the monster by the horns, and threw it to the side. It crashed to the ground, knocking up dirt all over. "Whoa." said Charlie, looking at his hands. The monster got back up and growled. "Try again, moron." It charged once more. He caught it again by the horns. They struggled, with dirt being thrown up at all sides. "You aren't gonna push me around anymore." said Charlie. "Today, I put you in your place." He ripped off the creature's head, and held it up over his. "Yeah!" He threw it away, and went over to the cedar, where Mary was still chained. "Gosh, you're so sexy right now..." she said. He broke the chains, and she jumped into his arms. "That's a life." he whispered. "Hey, twip."

He woke up. Caden was standing right in front of him. "What are you staring at? You staring at my girl again?" He gave Charlie another shove, knocking him against the locker. "Caden!" Mary ran over. "Let him go! He wasn't hurting anyone!" "I didn't hurt him. I just..." She glared at him, and he stuttered a bit. Charlie interrupted. "I'm fine." He pushed past Caden. "Charlie..." said Mary. But Charlie wasn't thinking about her. He had his mind on other things.

The final bell rang, and school ended for the day. As he began to walk out, he saw Thunk and a bunch of other guys wrestling in the field. He turned his head to the right, and saw Mary walk out dressed for cheerleading practice. He didn't see Caden anywhere. He was about to go after her, but he thought for a moment. "Now's my chance." He thought. He walked over to her. "Hey Mary." He said. "Oh, Charlie. Didn't see you there. Hey, I'm sorry..." "I don't care about the big lug. I think you and I should go out some time." "Oh, uh..." "Seriously." He walked closer to her, and she moved back against the wall. "Charlie, I don't like this." "Hey, I may not be the strongest guy in the school. But I can still be tough enough for you. Wait here. I'll go show you." He started to walk towards the field. "Charlie, no!" She took his hand. "Those guys will kill you!" "You think I'm that weak? You think I can't handle those sweaty morons?"

“Charlie, you’re hurting me.” He saw he was gripping her hand. He immediately came to his senses. “I-I’m sorry, Mary. I didn’t...I gotta go.” He walked away. “Charlie...”

Charlie sat down in the gymnasium, lost in thought. He opened up the book back to the page that had Gilgamesh on it. He turned the pages, skimming through the story. “You never had people pushing you around. You never had to fight for the girl you loved. You never had a problem with being weak. Not like me.” He came near the end. He saw a picture of Gilgamesh mourning, apparently over his lost friend. “After all that?” said Charlie. He read on.

Gilgamesh, afraid for his mortal life, journeyed to Utnapishtim, the only man granted immortality by the gods. But he simply told Gilgamesh that no one can live forever. “Except you.” Said Charlie. “So, what are you going to do? Gilgamesh went home and returned to his kingship. “That’s it?” said Charlie. He searched around the pages. “All that power, and you couldn’t just take immortality? Two-thirds god my foot.” He shut the book. He closed his eyes. “That’s all you do? You loser. I thought you could help me. My mistake” He shoved the book into his backpack, and walked out.

## II.

Charlie didn’t say much on the way home. He simply grumbled under his breath, and thought of Caden and Mary laughing at him. “Stupid, stupid, stupid.” He got home, took out his keys, and opened the door. He threw down his backpack, and sat down on the couch. “Mom?” There was no answer. “No home yet.” He said. He sighed, and leaned back, putting his feet up on the couch, and his head against the couch’s arm. He closed his eyes for a moment. He opened them again when he thought he saw something.

There was a book lying on the table. It was *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. He looked around, and picked it up. “Maybe you can help me.” He opened it up, and looked at the vivid pictures painted by a contemporary. “Knights always rescue girls.” He said. “I bet this guy rescued a lot.” As he turned the pages, he took in the Medieval imagery; it filled his mind with jousting and dragon. But before he finished it, he put it down. “I’m hungry.”

He went into the kitchen, where he found a note on the refrigerator. “Working late

tonight. You'll have to fix supper for yourself. See you around eleven. Mom." "Great." He got an apple out of the fridge, and bit into it. "I wish I was a knight. Going around, saving princesses and fighting bad guys. That would be great." He sat back down on the couch and leaned back again. "That would be great."

The telephone ringing startled him. He went over and picked it up. "Hey, Charlie, it's Mary. I just wanted to call to see if you were all right. You ran away pretty fast. You seemed like something was bothering you." "Mary! Oh. No...well, kind of. I'm fine now. I'm glad you called. I didn't mean to hurt you." "Oh, I know. Listen, I'm really sorry about Caden. He's acting like a jerk right now. Anyways, you said something about tutoring. Could you come over tonight? I'm having friends over, and we could always use a little help with Math." "Sure, I can help." "Aw, that's great! See you at seven. My house." "I-I'll be there." She hung up. He jumped up. "Yes!"

After finishing his homework, Charlie settled down on his bed for a nap. As soon as he closed his eyes, He felt himself being transported to a faraway land. He saw before him a great crowd; he was standing in the middle of a stadium, with scores of people cheering. He noticed something else. Everyone was wearing Medieval clothes. He looked at his hands. They were armored; he looked at his reflection in a puddle of water on the ground, and saw that he was in full knight armor. His visor was up, and he could see his face, looking very confused. "Good luck!" he turned when he heard a familiar voice.

He saw Mary, dressed like a princess, in the stands. She was waving to him. He smiled, and waved back. Just then, Caden, also in armor pushed by him. "Out of the way, twip." He walked up to her, and she wrapped her colored handkerchief around his arm. Charlie began to get angry again. "No...this is my dream." "Are the jousters ready?" said the King, standing up. "Yeah." Said Caden, spitting on the ground near Charlie's feet. "Yes." Said Charlie. "We are."

Charlie went to his side of the stadium, and mounted his horse. He was surprised how easy it seemed. The armor lay on his body with a weight, but he barely noticed it. All he cared about was knocking Caden off his high horse. A young boy ran out, and handed Charlie his

lance. He never felt so powerful, sitting upright on a warhorse, covered in armor, and holding a lethal weapon in his hands. He felt like he could take on the world.

“To your positions!” said the king. Charlie rode forward a bit, noting how natural at horse riding he now suddenly was. He looked at the king. Now that he saw him, he looked a bit like Mary’s father-round, with a brown beard streaked with grey and a balding head, this time concealed with a crown. Charlie laughed as he surveyed the people. “They’re cheering for me.” He thought. “No one’s ever cheered for me.” “Hey, weasel.” He turned to look at Caden, who was sitting on his horse several yards away. “Pay attention, twip. I want you to know when I bust your ribs open.”

Needless to say, the mood was ruined. Charlie looked back at the king, who raised his handkerchief. Charlie cleared his throat, and slowed his heartrate a bit. He realized that he didn’t know why he was doing any of these things, only that he just seemed to know what a knight would do in this particular moment. For now, this day, he was a knight. And, so far as he understood, his own bully stood fifty yards away, just asking to be knocked to the ground. And Charlie had a lance in his hand.

King Dean dropped his handkerchief, and it was on. Charlie lowered his visor, couched his lance, and charged forward; Caden did the same. Charlie felt nothing but rage, keeping his lance pointed at Caden’s chest. Their spears collided with each other’s shields, splintering. Charlie looked away to keep the splinters out of his unprotected eyes. They rode by each other, no damage taken. “You were lucky, twip.” Said Caden.

The paiges ran up and gave them new lances. “Ready?” said King Dean. He dropped his handkerchief again. They charged once more. This time, Charlie stayed focused. He held back his rage, and thought of Mary. “For Mary.” His lance slammed into Caden’s chest, and carried him off the horse. He hit the ground, and rolled over onto his belly. The audience cheered. Charlie raised his broken lance into the air, basking in his glory.

Suddenly, the cheers were split with a scream. He looked down to see Mary, who was kneeling next to Caden. She had turned him over; the armor around his chest was split,

and blood was flowing out. "He's dead!" she cried. The crowd screamed and ran. Mary was crying, and Charlie seemed the only person who was not emotionally affected. "B-but I'm the good guy..." he said. "He's the bully. He deserved it..."

Charlie woke up. "I'm the good guy..." He sat up, and looked at the clock. It said 6:36. "Oh, man!" He jumped up out of bed. "I'm gonna be late!" He showered quickly, brushed his teeth, combed his hair, and put on nicer clothes. He stuffed his math book and calculator into his backpack, hauled it onto his back, and ran out into the cold evening.

He arrived at Mary's house, which was several houses down from his on the opposite side. He knocked on the door, and Mr. Dean answered it. Though much less regal, Mr. Dean was still round and balding, and had the same smile. "Ah, Charlie, come in! Come in!" "Thanks." He walked in, and wiped his feet on the mat. "Mary's been waiting for some help. She's in the kitchen with the others." "Others?"

He walked into the kitchen, and saw Mary giggling with three other cheerleaders, Mattie, Dana, and Tina. "Charlie!" said Mary, waving. "Come on over!" Charlie sat down at the table with them, and opened his book. "You're a real lifesaver, Charlie." Said Dana. "If my grades got any lower, I'd be...one of those...flat fish thingies..." "A flounder?" "You're sooo smart, Charlie." "Yeah." Said Tina. "Sooo smart." Charlie blushed a little, and took out a pencil. "All right. Let's talk about fractions then."

The night went on nicely. The girls giggled a good deal, but Charlie observed that the work he gave them was progressively getting better. Finally, at nine, Charlie got up to stretch. His phone rang. "Oh, sorry ladies. Can I take this?" "Sure!" they all said in unison. He walked out.

Charlie walked outside, and answered his phone. "Hey Mom." "Hi, Charlie. Sorry that I'm running late. Have you eaten yet?" "I'm at Mary Dean's. She asked for me to tutor her and her friends. We got pizza." "Oh, good. Do I know Mary?" "She lives up the street. She's blonde, been in school with me since preschool..." "Oh, the girl you have a crush on." "Mom!" "Sorry, dear. How is she doing?" "We're making progress. Her friends are doing well, too." "That's

good.” “Say, Mom, were you reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*?” “Oh, no. Just found that downstairs. I thought you would like it. I can’t stand it.” “Why?” “Oh, it’s about this knight who tries to do the right thing and ends up embarrassing himself.” Charlie blinked. “He stands up for his king, but then has to go meet this green knight, and die, or something. It’s horribly grim. He lives, but he gets called a coward. It’s a wretched story.” “Oh...thanks, Mom.” “Oh, don’t mention it, sweetie. I’ll see you tonight. Love you. Bye.”

Still processing the new information, Charlie walked back in. He was too lost in thought to hear another voice in the kitchen. He nearly jumped when he saw Caden standing in there, talking to Mary. “Oh, hey, Charlie.” Said Mary. “Caden, something you want to say?” He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry for pushing you, Charlie. My bad.” Mary smiled, and kissed him on the cheek. Charlie’s chest felt like it was missing an important organ. “Thanks so much, Charlie.” Said Mary. “I feel smarter.” Said Tina. “You’re so nice.” “S-sure...” said Charlie. “I guess I’ll go now...” “Bye, Charlie!” they all said in unison. As he walked out, he heard Caden again. “So, the dance is in Friday.” He said. “Want to go, Mary?” “I don’t know, Caden. I...guess.” Charlie clenched his fist. So much for rescuing the princess.

### III.

Charlie awoke the next morning gloomier than usual. He was no longer mad, just miserable. The girl of his dreams had invited him to her house. They had sat next to each other. He was so close. But it didn't matter. She had chosen Caden, and that was that. And now that it was Thursday, and the dance being a day away, there was no hope of sealing the deal.

He slugged out of bed, got dressed, and almost tripped down the stairs. His mother was sitting at the table, drinking tea. "Good morning, darling. How did you sleep?" "Lousy." "Mmm. I can see that. I thought you had a good time last night." "I...it's nothing." He got the cereal out, and poured some into a bowl. Mrs. Kyle smiled. "I have something that will cheer you up." "Mom...I'm not in the mood." He picked up her tablet, and turned it on.

Charlie poured the milk onto his cereal, but almost dropped it. "Hey sport." He heard a familiar voice. He turned around. Mrs. Kyle held the tablet in front of her; Mr. Kyle was on the

screen, smiling back at him. He resembled Charlie, with reddish-brown hair, but a more square jaw associated with the military. "Dad?" "Hey, kiddo. Your mom says something's been bugging you the past few weeks." "It's... nothing." "It's not nothing, son. Talk to me." Charlie sat down.

"Where are you, now?" said Charlie. "They have us stationed just outside of Seoul. Nice people here. So, what's bugging you?" "It's Mary." "Dean? Nice girl. Knew her dad. Good guy." "I..." "Her boyfriend cutting in on your romance?" Charlie was a bit surprised, but did not show it. "Yeah. His name's Caden. He's a jerk." "I've known plenty of those, especially at your age. They need a good swift kick in the..." "Jeffrey." said Mrs. Kyle. "I was going to say nards. Point is..." Charlie was looking down at his shoes.

"Look at me, boy." said Mr. Kyle. Charlie slowly lifted his head. "Listen to me, son. Your dad's gonna give you some advice. Bullies are a reality of life. They're everywhere. But you don't give in to them. You fight back. But you don't stoop to their levels. Mary already knows you're better than him. That's why she keeps talking to you. Girls can't stand bullies. One of the reasons why we need them. Mary's a smart girl. She'll come to see, eventually. But, until then..." He reached over, and held up a book. It was James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*. "I read this book when I was your age. It changed my life. It taught me that a man has responsibilities. The man, Nathaniel, is born of two worlds. He ends up fighting for both. Be a man, Charlie. I know you can." Charlie smiled.

"Thanks, Dad." Mrs. Kyle pulled out her own copy of the book, and handed it to him. "You read that, son." said Mr. Kyle. "Okay..." "What was that?" "Yes!" said Charlie. "Yes, what?" "Sir! Yes sir!" "Atta boy!" said Mr. Kyle. Charlie looked at his watch. "Oh, crud! I'm going to be late!" he shoved the rest of his cereal into his mouth, and dashed off, book in hand. "When were you going to tell him I gave you that book?" said Mrs. Kyle. "He'll figure that part out himself."

When Charlie got to school, he leafed through the pages. Nathaniel, or 'Natty Bumppo', was a ragged frontiersman, who fought with the bad guys while protecting two innocent women, sisters, from all danger. He was a bit like the two heroes Charlie had experienced before- he had

Gilgamesh's untamed ferocity, but Gawain's elegance and gentility. "Better turn to the end to see what happens." He thought. He flipped to the end. It was not terribly happy, to say the least. "One of the ladies dies?" he thought. He read on. He read Cora and Uncas' funeral. He read Taminund's final words. "Last of the Mohicans." he thought. "Two worlds. So, why couldn't you save her, Natty? With all your skills, you're just a..." He looked up to see Mary and Caden talking in front of her locker.

Mary was smiling at Caden, showing no sign of disapproval. Charlie closed his eyes. "Maybe the hero isn't supposed to get the girl." He shoved the book in his backpack without reading more. "Maybe the hero is supposed to be alone." He walked away from them to his first class.

He drifted through his first four classes and lunch without paying too much attention to anything. Any time he heard anyone say, 'Dance', he zoned out and thought of Cora's funeral. Despite his dad's words, Charlie was feeling very powerless. By the time he got to Morris' class, he was almost too morose to care about his favorite subject. As he sat down at his desk, he drifted off into another dream.

He awoke laying on a bed of grass and flowers. All around him stood an old forest; the trees were so thick barely any sunlight got in through the leaves. He got up, and almost instinctively went over to a small brook nearby. He was strangely not surprised to see himself dressed in cow-leather tramping clothes and a raccoon-fur hat. In his hand was a long Kentucky rifle. "Great. What now?" He heard rustling. He looked around. He saw nothing. But in the distance, he heard a scream.

He followed it down a narrow path, seeing footprints leading north. He gripped his rifle, and ran down the path. The screaming seemed to get louder the further on down he got. Soon, forest gave way to mountain, as he was beginning to run up the steep climb of a Apennine cliff. The forest seemed to melt away as he focused on following the familiar voice. As he came out of the trees, he saw what appeared to be Caden, dressed like an Indian, carrying Mary on his shoulder. Mary had been screaming for help. Caden looked back at him.

"Let her go!" cried Charlie, raising his gun. Caden smirked, and went over to the cliff edge. "Shoot me, and I'll drop her." "She's your girlfriend!" cried Charlie, realizing that he had never broken reality with his own dreams. "You can't treat her this way!" "I can do whatever I want, twip. Mary's devoted to me. She'll do anything I want. Right, babe?" Mary looked at Charlie with an expression that seemed to say, "help me".

Charlie realized that there was only one thing he could do. He laid his rifle down on the ground, and raised his hands. "I'm all yours, Caden. Just let her go." Caden smiled, pulled out a knife, and threw it at him. It stuck in Charlie's shoulder, and he dropped to the ground in pain. "Charlie!" cried Mary, fighting Caden's grip.

"Get off me, you crazy broad!" said Caden, wrestling with her. Charlie saw his chance. Although something was telling him not to, he reached for the rifle. He picked it up, cocked it, and fired. It hit Caden straight in the heart, he released Mary, and staggered back towards the edge. But as he fell, he grabbed a hold of Mary's arm, and they went tumbling off together.

Charlie ran over to the edge. "Mary!"

"Charlie?" He woke up. Mr. Morris was standing in front of him. "Charlie, the bell rang. You're dismissed." Charlie blinked. "Sorry, Mr. Morris." "What's troubling you?" "I'm...just tired." "Does this have something to do with Mary?" Charlie looked surprised. "I've observed you in class. You look at her a good deal. You didn't look at her once today. I thought for sure you were going to ask her to the dance tomorrow." "I can't. She's going with someone else. Besides..." "Besides what?" "I'm not her kind of guy." "I believe that's up to her." Charlie got up. "Thank you, sir." "I'll write you a hall pass."

Charlie walked out of the classroom, and stopped by his locker. He pulled out his English book, and closed it. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Caden walking with two of his goons. They were laughing about something probably juvenile. "You think Mary knows?" said one of the guys. "No way." said Caden. "She's not smart enough. Besides, she'll never say 'no' to me." They laughed. Charlie clenched his fist again. "I can't let her go with him." said Charlie. "I got to save her. I've got to go to the dance."

## IV.

Charlie ran home that evening. His mother had just gotten home, and was unlocking the door. "Oh, hi, sweetie. Just got home myself." "Mom, I'm going to the dance tomorrow." She looked surprised. "The dance? You've always said you hated those." "I do...I did...I...Mom, I need to go. It's important." "Is this about Mary?" "...Yeah." She smiled. "Come on. Let me show you something."

They went into her room. She opened up the closet, and took out a suit jacket. This was your dad's when he was your age. He can't fit in it anymore (don't tell him that). But you can wear it tomorrow night." Charlie held it in his hands. "When was the last time he wore it?" "Long time ago. You know, it's funny. He went to our dance just to talk to me. I was seeing a jerk myself, and he came to convince me I was making a mistake. Turns out I was. The boy I was seeing was planning on something else afterwards, and I wanted no part of that. And that was the best decision I ever made. She pulled out a tie and the pants that went with the jacket. "Oh, just wait until Mary sees you in these."

After dinner, Charlie went to his room, and shuffled through his books. "There's got to be one with a happy ending." he said. "I need a 'guy gets girl' story. When he didn't find one, he sighed, and stood up. He sat down on his bed. "What's it take, huh? I don't want Mary's love anymore. I just...I just want her to be safe. What do I have to do to keep her out of that monkey's hands?" He closed his eyes.

As he drifted off to sleep later that night, he found himself in a dark cave. He got up, and looked around. There was barely any light at all. But soon, a path was illuminated by what appeared to be moonlight. He began to walk down it slowly, not knowing what to expect.

He looked at his hands; he didn't seem to be wearing any literary or historical outfits, just the clothes he was sleeping in. As he walked down the path, he came to what appeared to be a large hall. Moonlight poured in from the sides through window-like slits, showing on the opposite wall the statues of the three literary figures he had been reading about. From right to left they were Gilgamesh, Sir Gawain, and Natty Bumppo. There was writing on the base of each

statue.

He bent down and read the inscription on Gilgamesh's. It read, 'Strength'. He looked at the statue's huge muscles and the axe it gripped in one hand. "Only thing you couldn't conquer was death." he said. He moved on to Gawain. His read, 'Courage'. Charlie laughed a little. "But you were a coward." He stopped for a moment. "But you did go willingly to your death. You just wanted to protect your king, didn't you? You stood up for your friend. I guess...I guess that's courage." He walked over to Natty's. It read, 'Passion'. "Passionate about what? You couldn't save the girl. You couldn't even save your...brother, or whatever he was. You failed." He looked up at Natty's face. It resembled his father's, just with a beard. "You were passionate about Mom." he said. You knew you had to help her. So you did. I guess that's all a hero really needs- to be passionate."

He looked over to the side. There was a small podium with another inscription on it. Moonlight was shining directly on it. He walked over to it. It read, "There is no courage without strength. There can be no passion without courage. There is no strength without passion."

He looked at it intently. "I think I get it now." he said. He looked up, and saw a door before him, painted with a question mark. It opened up to him. "It's time to be a man." he said. "For Mary." He walked through.

He woke up the next morning feeling empowered. He got dressed and went downstairs, eating breakfast as usual. But he had a feeling of power he had never had before. His mother noticed. "You seem happy today." "I know what I've got to do, Mom." He cleaned out his dishes. "Good boy." she said.

When he got to school, he saw Caden laughing with his cronies again. He saw Mary at her locker, talking with her friends. He walked up to her. "Oh, hi, Charlie." she said. "Thank you for Wednesday night." she said. "I think I'm getting the math better." "Good. Uh...Mary, I just wanted to say that I'll be at the dance tonight." "Oh...I'm sorry. I'm..." "Going with Caden? I know. I just wanted to say that I'll be there. In case you need help with math problems." "She laughed. You're really nice, Charlie. I hope you find a date!" The school bell rang. "Sorry, got to

get to class." she said. "See you at the dance!" She walked off. "Yeah...see you there." he replied.

Throughout the day, he focused on whatever he needed to. He found that he never zoned out, nor drifted off to anything that was off subject. He felt strengthened by his newfound responsibility, and pressed on. He also found that he was not feeling impatient; that time, while of the essence, was coming at her own pace. He cared about everything he needed to, and that told him that he was ready for the evening.

After school, he went home and showered. He shaved until there was no trace of stubble left on his face. He put on his father's suit, and straightened his tie. He found that he did not need anyone's help tying it. He put on his black loafers, and buttoned his sleeves with cufflinks his grandfather had given him. He checked himself in the mirror, and almost jumped, barely recognizing himself.

"You look just like your father at sixteen." said Mrs. Kyle, walking over. "He was very dashing in that suit." "Why did you keep it all these years?" "For you, silly. I knew that one day you'd need it." He laughed. "You were right, Mom. You're always right." She kissed his cheek. "I have to be. I'm a mom. Are you ready." "Yes. I am."

Charlie's school was not far away from his house. For every day since his freshman year, he had walked there. He had never really thought about the journey, but found that night that it was actually quite relaxing. He came to the school, and walked up to the door. He sighed. "For Mary." He walked in.

Inside the gymnasium, the students were gathered around, talking, drinking punch, and laughing. Contemporary pop music was playing, and there were strings of confetti and ribbon everywhere. Feeling more relaxed than he normally would be in the same situation, Charlie got himself a drink of punch, and walked into the middle of the room.

As he began to observe the room, he saw Mary and Caden enter. Mary was wearing a lovely blue dress with a pink rose as a corsage. Caden wore a nice black suit that was much newer than Charlie's. Mary had her arm in his, and, though angered a bit, Charlie kept himself at ease. Finally, Caden excused himself, and Charlie walked up to her.

"Charlie!" she said. "You're here! You look good." "It's my dad's." he said. "You look beautiful." he said. "Aw, thanks! You're so sweet. Caden's in a pretty chipper mood. I think you two could..." "Hey!"

They turned to see Caden walking up. He shoved Charlie in the shoulder, knocking him back a few steps. "Get away from my girl." "Caden!" cried Mary. "We were just talking!" "Stay out of this, Mary." said Caden. "I told you to keep away from her, twip." Charlie remembered ripping his head off a few days before, but only smiled. "I know, Caden. I'm going." He walked away. He looked back to see Mary yelling at him. "Now she knows, you pig."

The night passed rather nicely, with Charlie having some pizza and watching the dancers move across the floor. But, as the clock showed nine, he noticed Caden leading Mary out the back door. "Oh, no..." He set down his cup and went after them.

Caden lead her outside into the dark parking lot, taking her over to the only streetlamp nearby. "What's this about, Caden?" she said. "We're alone now. I thought we'd talk." "Talk. Right. I'm cold. Let's go back in." He grabbed her by the arm. "We go in when I say so." he said. "You're hurting me, Caden!" "Trust me, that's just the first of it." She began to cry out, but he put his hand over her mouth. But just then, Charlie showed up. "Let her go, you big ape."

Caden turned to look at him, and laughed. "Be with you in a second, twip." "No." said Charlie. "It's long passed the time we should've done this. Put up your defenses, Caden. And let her go. It's you and me."

Caden laughed again. "Alright. Fine." He released her. "But don't expect me to pay your medical bills." Charlie swung at him, but he dodged, and hit Charlie in the gut. Charlie dropped to the ground, in intense pain. Caden then kicked him over with the force he would hit a soccer ball. "Oh, don't quit on me now." said Caden. "I'm just getting started. "No!" Mary jumped on his back, and covered his eyes. "Ow! Get off me, you crazy broad!" He backed into the wall with her, and threw her off.

Charlie wiped blood off his mouth, and got up. He remembered jousting, and knocking the bully off his own horse. He ran into Caden's chest, and punched him in the face. Caden

rubbed his chin. "That it? You're such a wimp." He slapped Charlie in the face with the back of his hand, knocking him over again. "You think you're like some kind of knight." said Caden. "Saving the princess from the mean old dragon. Well, this dragon's got claws." He kicked Charlie over again, and walked over to Mary, who was struggling to get up. "I could have had her any time I wanted. But I wanted to wait until a special occasion to get it on. Mary here never knew what she was getting into. Plus, my dad'll have lawyers for me. Just in case things get nasty." Mary looked at Charlie with the same look she gave him when Caden had been holding her over the cliff. He knew what he had to do.

Charlie got down on his knees, and held up his hands. "I'm all yours, Caden. Just let her go." Caden looked puzzled. "All right. No more screwing around. I'm going to knock you into next week. Then I'm going to have some fun with Mary. In front of you." He grabbed Charlie by the collar, and began to punch him in the face. "Charlie!" cried Mary, tears running down her face. Just then, the door opened, and a group of students and faculty ran out, having heard the noise. Caden's jaw dropped open when he saw them. "Release him." said a teacher, standing in the doorway.

Charlie sat on the edge of the back of an ambulance, as police led Caden away. Mrs. Kyle ran up. "Oh, Charlie! What happened?" "I stood up to the bully. And..." Mary walked up. "Charlie..." Mrs. Kyle looked at her and then Charlie. "I'll tell you all about it later, Mom." She looked back at Mary, and smiled. She gave him a kiss. "I knew you could do it." She walked away.

Mary sat down next to him. "Thank you." she said. He smiled. "I don't know why I didn't see through that pig." she said. "He was going to hurt me. But you knew. And you came to rescue me." "I couldn't let a lady get hurt. A man has his responsibilities." "You're more of a man than Caden ever was, Charlie. I should've seen that. I'm sorry." She gave him a kiss on the lips. "The dance isn't quite over, yet." she said. "We've still got some time." They stood up. "I have to warn you." he said. "I can't dance. I honestly didn't think I'd get this far." She laughed. "We'll work on that."

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