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Medieval Literature: Heroicism and Sacrifice

The Old English Period is the oldest period in which British literature was recorded. This period took place from 700 A.D to 1066, when the Normans defeated the English in the Battle of Hastings. While most 'literature' was passed down orally, some works were recorded on paper, and survived through the centuries to the present. Most literature in the Old English Period had three things in common; they had larger-than-life heroes, death and sacrifice, and responsibility.

Back then, heroes in real life were meant to emulate the heroes in literature. The heroes in literature were defined as "someone who gives up his/her life, or risks giving up her/his life, to save the lives of or otherwise protect a larger group," (Latham, Old English). They were supposed to be flamboyant and loud, unafraid about the potential risk of death in the face of danger. Beowulf is one such example of a larger-than-life hero. Beowulf is the main protagonist of the same epic of his name, *Beowulf*. As expected of a hero in those days, he boasts of his great feats and eats and drinks heartily when he is invited to King Hrothgar's hall to slay the monster Grendel. Grendel, who is the first main enemy in the story, is shown to be a terrible monster who kills without abandon. In a show of physical strength, Beowulf rips Grendel's arm off with his bare hands, and kills him: "The direful demon, damage incurable/Was seen on his shoulder, his sinews were shivered,/His body did burst. To Beowulf was given/Glory in battle," (Beowulf, XIII 24-27). His strength is completely unrealistic, but showcases one of the most important traits

they saw in a hero. Beowulf once again displays his strength when he slays Grendel's mother later. For their heroicism, King Hrothgar showers Beowulf and his men with many lavish gifts and sends them home. Beowulf becomes king of his own land and rules over his people with a fair and just hand.

It was mostly men who were considered heroes back then, as women were usually seen as the ones needing saving. Heroines in the Old English Period were often peaceweavers. Peaceweavers were women who were close relatives of nobility, who were given in marriage to the king or leader of an enemy group in order to establish peace between the two groups (Latham, Week 1 Terms). One example of a peaceweaver is Queen Wealhtheow from *Beowulf*, King Hrothgar's wife. As Queen, she represents the ideals of a peaceweaver, and later uses this power to try to protect her sons. However, her plan fails and her sons die. The peace established under Beowulf's rule doesn't last forever, either.

Death and sacrifice are also key themes in Old English literature. Beowulf's story ends with his death. His kingdom comes under attack by a dragon, and he faces it alone. He is able to bring the monster down, but at the cost of his own life. His men find his body and are shaken: "They saw on the sand then soulless a-lying,/His slaughter-bed holding, him who rings had given them/In days that were done; then the death-bringing moment/Was come to the good one, that the king very warlike,/Wielder of Weders, with wonder-death perished" (Beowulf XLI 89-93). They give him a great funeral and recall all his great deeds with reverence. Heroes of the Old English Period were expected to lay down their lives for others, and Beowulf set a fine example of that expectation.

The focus on death in Old English literature was not just limited to death in battle. "The Wife's Lament" is a poem told from the point of view of a woman in the grave. This elegy reflects a popular theme called 'Ubi Sunt'. 'Ubi Sunt' is Latin for 'where have they gone', and it refers to literature that focuses on the 'good old days'; there's a nostalgia for the ideal state the world started in, with wealth and noble heroicness. The woman (likely a peaceweaver) in the poem describes her suffering while being alone and friendless after her husband's death, likely resulting in the other family becoming an enemy again and her eventual death (Wife's Lament). The fixation on death in the Old English Period was probably due to the uncertainty of life and death in that day and age, as safety could rarely be assured.

Another example of death and sacrifice is the story of the Battle of Maldon, which took place at the River Blackwater in Essex, in 991 A.D. At the end of the poem, the warriors honor their fallen king by fighting on until they are killed: "And then they went forth - for life they recked not. Then 'gan the house men hardly to fight,/The fierce spear bearers - and they begged God/That they might avenge their friendly lord,/And on their enemies bring death," (Maldon, Part IV). Brythwold, one of the men, encourages the others, yelling, "There lies our chief all cut down,/Good man on the ground; for ever may he grieve/Who now from this war-play thinketh to go./I am old in years - hence I will not, /But by the side of mine own lord,/By my chief so loved, I think to lie" (Maldon, Part IV). Back then, a comitatus (a group of men in a military unit) was expected to lay down their lives if their leader was killed in battle. It would be shameful if they left the battle alive when he didn't. Such was one of the many responsibilities of hero roles in the Old English Period.

Responsibilities were a very major part of culture in the Old English Period. Everyone was expected to play their part to the best of their ability, regardless of social class. Warriors and heroes were expected to fight well and die nobly. Women were expected to secure peace and provide for their children and husbands. Kings were expected to rule justly and lead their men into battle. There was still a hierarchy when it came to meeting needs. If a person had to choose between keeping the king from starving or their child from starving, they would choose the king because he was more important. The child would be 'exposed', meaning they would be thrown out and left to fend for themselves (often dying). There is one reference to this in *Beowulf*, where there is short mention of Scyld being taken in as a child: "Since first he found him friendless and wretched,/The earl had had terror: comfort he got for it," (I 6-7). The warriors at the Battle of Maldon had the responsibility of loyalty, and they fought until they followed their leader into death. Beowulf's comitatus, when faced by the dragon, were dishonorable: His companions by no means/Were banded about him, bairns of the princes,/With valorous spirit, but they sped to the forest,/Seeking for safety," (Beowulf, XXXV 130-133). Instead of facing the threat, they ran away, shirking their responsibilities as Beowulf's comitatus. Queen Wealhtheow, and the woman in "The Wife's Lament", both upheld their duties as peaceweavers to the very best of their ability, though they met terrible fates in the end.

Old English literature was full of thrilling and inspiring tales of larger-than-life heroes, death and sacrifice, and the importance of upholding social responsibilities. Heroes such as Beowulf performed amazing feats of strength and courage. Peaceweavers like Queen Wealhtheow and the woman in "The Wife's Lament" performed their duties as peaceweavers, sacrificing their lives in the end for peace. The warriors in the *Battle of Maldon* upheld their

duties and fought to the death against their enemies. The oldest works of British literature are rich with the culture of the early Anglo-Saxons.

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