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Epic Word and Image

The history of ancient times especially ancient Greeks is written and preserved in the form of Epic. An epic is a type of writing that Greek and some other ancient civilizations used to narrate the historic battles and heroics of their braves and was generally in the form of a long narrative poem. The Iliad and Odyssey are the two most famous and widely celebrated epics which describe the nature of a hero in ancient times. The Iliad is also a famous epic about ancient Greek heroes and battles and generally, there are four rules upon which the heroes lived their lives. These rules are nobility, bravery in battles, having skills of diplomacy and oration and the pursuit of excellence. The examples of great heroes in this epic are Achilles (a great Greek warrior), Agamemnon, Hector(prince of troy), Odysseus, Aias (also known as Ajax) and many others. A hero has a noble lineage and is born as a prince, a son of a great warrior or any other privilege from birth. An ancient hero is usually a well-established warrior and can defeat anyone on the battlefield by his skills in warfare and wrestling. No one can get to this level of heroism by just staying in his own village rather he has to travel a lot to get from countries to countries because distance makes actions of a hero far from selfishness and personality-centred.

The values and nature of a hero of medieval epics are also expressed in Divine Comedy of Dante and in the epic poem Beowulf. In Divine Comedy, Dante is supposedly taking a trip of hell where there are different groups of people according to their sins and crimes and they are aboded in their respective places. Dante has a guide as a hero who shows him the path and gives information about different groups. In medieval literature, one common characteristic of a hero is knowledge. He must be knowledgeable enough to lead people and make correct decisions. The values of the warriors and heroes are also evident in a medieval poem Beowulf. The epic was written by a Christian monk in the 9th century and explain the culture and values of a great German warrior and hero Beowulf. Beowulf was considered as one of the greatest warriors and heroes of his time and was famous for his bravery and strength. He excelled others by acquiring expertise in swimming, fighting and conquering. In medieval ages, the nature of the hero was considerably influenced by the church and divine teachings. Other characteristics that were present in the ancient heroes including, knowledge, skills of warfare, oration, bravery and discipline were still present in the heroes of this age. For example in the epic of ‘The song of Roland’, Roland is the warrior and hero under the Charlemagne. The medieval attributes of a hero admired in this epic are loyalty, valor in battle and a strong urge and belief to fight for Christianity.

The general traits and the aspects of nature and characteristics of a hero are more or less the same in the heroes of ancient and medieval times. In fact, according to some of the scholars, the fundamental criterions for a person to be considered as a hero are the same from olden times and are still regarded as heroic traits in the modern age. However, there are some differences among them regarding goals and character based upon their era and region. Values of the society to which a hero belongs are important as well as depends upon the authors of the epics. Comparing the heroes of ancient Greek and medieval times, the best example is the character of Achilles who was considered as the best of all the warriors in his time. His legendary heroics with his Spartans from the Greek army against the army of troy are inexplicably extraordinary and was regarded as god-like among the Greek army. The main attribute of Achilles as described in a number of epics is his excessive pride in himself and immense strength in both mental and physical sense. On the other hand, the medieval hero Roland was more concerned and duty, loyalty and sincerity to the Christian faith and to defend the honor of his country and religion. As in one his speech, he said “Barons, my lords, Charles left us in this place. We know our duty: to die like good men for our King. Fight to defend the holy Christian faith(Benton & John)”. Odysseus was a very cunning and intellectually very sound Greek hero and is famous for his plan to enter into the city of Troy using a hollow horse. Like Achilles, Odysseus’s excessive pride and believe in himself is very prominent as he refused to believe any role of gods at the end of the war in Troy. The medieval heroes were more inclined towards their loyalty to their kings and leaders. The reason behind such a trend was the increasing influence of the feudal system in Europe that was based around the loyalty and oath between a lord and his vassals. In this system, the Lord would give his vassals land and other presents in return to their services and heroics in the times of battle. Other than that, the Christian church also had a great impact on the lives of people so the combination of Christian influence and feudalism resulted on loyalty not only to the Church but also to the vassal’s lord (Lowrey & Belen)

The idea of a hero evolves throughout the centuries. In the ancient age of Greek, the qualities or idea of a hero were quite well-defined. He had leadership qualities, a strong warrior and would excel on the battlefield. On the other hand, the ideals and heroes of Roman provided a sharp contrast to that of ancient Greek ideals. According to them, the ideal leader is the one who shows fortitude, accepts fate and is every time ready to sacrifice his own happiness for the wellbeing and safety of his empire. Germanic tribes also valued physical strength as a mean of developing a relationship between thanes and their lord. The values are clearly defined but for the heroes of medieval ages, more fault is observed. Although they possessed the characteristics of bravery, loyalty and a strong belief in Christian faith, they were still fallible. The example of Roland is the best among the powerful and best warrior and heroes but his abilities are doubted as he couldn’t call for Charlemagne’s help/aid. The qualities of courage and loyalty are important but too much adherence to them does not guarantee success in achieving desired/required goals.

The concept of a hero as depicted in historical tales and epics changed over time from an infallible character to a figure who has shortcomings regarding the study of epic heroes from ancient to medieval epics. These changes are due to the fact that each historic time period is characterized by challenges and adaptations specific to that era and then shape the values and traditions of each culture. Also, the region plays an important role as public interests and likings or disliking of people belonging to a particular area may vary from the rest and may shape the literature and their heroes subsequently.

Cited By:

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