

Beowulf: The Origins of Narcissistic Heroism in Literature

To analyze the ambitions of the titular character of the tenth century epic poem, Beowulf. We observe that due to Beowulf's foolish pride brought forth by his legendary acts of heroism; he is, indeed, a selfish warrior. This belief is further cemented by his infatuation with his own accomplishments, made clear by his frequent remarks on his heroic past, as well as his recounting of tales of his own achievements. To further establish this claim, however, we first need to analyze Beowulf's motivations regarding his countless acts of bravery, along with his primary resolution to defeat the ever-dastardly beast, Grendel. Beowulf's intentions are made abundantly clear throughout the entirety of the poem, as he states that his goal in defeating the beast is to win treasure, as well as fame. The titular warrior's conundrum is one shared by countless individuals and heroes forged in literary works across the eras. This conundrum being the act of heroism fueled by selfish intentions with carnal goals and desires. To explain, Beowulf is admittedly motivated by his own personal need to appear brave, as well as his inherent desire for fame, riches, and respect from the masses. Despite his acts of bravery having saved countless lives and eliminated risk of danger to many, our character's intentions behind such acts appear to be somewhat impure. To be quite clear, this does not in any way discredit said acts, nor does it solicit any judgment upon these acts due to the moral compass of he who enacted them. Our greatest evidence of Beowulf's selfish intentions are given in his lengthy greeting to Hrothgar. The warrior displays his obvious arrogance in several of his opening statements found in said greeting. Certainly not the least of which being his recounting of his heroic tales during this greeting; one of which being the quote "They had seen me boltered in the blood of enemies when I battled and bound five beasts, raided a troll-nest and in the night-sea slaughtered sea-brutes." This statement, while not appearing inherently prideful, gives us an exceptionally informative glimpse into the mind and motivations of the warrior. Not only is he providing his audience with tales of his own bravery, but he also finds himself, while perhaps not intentionally, revealing the true motive behind these ventures. Despite the previous statement made by the warrior being an obvious display of his own pride and foolish arrogance brought on by the aforementioned tales of his heroism, the reader is not explicitly made knowledgeable of his true prideful complex until his following statement. This statement being his explanation of his plan to defeat Grendel without weapons, using only his bare hands. "I hereby renounce sword and the shelter of the broad shield, the heavy war-board: hand-to-hand is how it will be, a life-and-death fight with the fiend," remarks Beowulf, giving an insightful reflection of his prioritizing of his own physical feats over his safety in battle. And as previously stated regarding his desire to battle the beast Grendel, it is well established that the warrior's primary desire driving these physical feats is, at its core, a need for fame. As we analyze the warrior's intentions, however, I find it overwhelmingly important for us to also understand that his pride and dangerous arrogance is not a complex only found in him, quite the contrary. In fact, if we could be honest with ourselves for a brief moment, it could be concluded that we all struggle with this inner moral battle. We, as human beings, seem to have a natural tendency to long for fame and recognition, and unfortunately we often find ourselves prioritizing our own carnal longing over our well-being. Not only that, but on an even more complex and existential level; we as a people tend to do great and helpful acts only for the recognition and attention from our

peers, or even the global masses on a much larger scale. We find this trait in ourselves more often than we'd like to admit, unfortunately. As we read the epic poem, we find countless parallels between that of the literary warrior and the modern man. These comparisons being made apparent by the aforementioned prideful tendencies of the warrior which parallel our every day struggle to do good in the modern world while also maintaining a pure intent while doing so. The literary piece in question provokes numerous inquiries we must make to ourselves in order to truly understand both the warrior's heart, and our own. Why do we commit acts of kindness, or in some cases bravery? Do we commit these acts in order to provide the down-trodden with hope, or even the endangered with safety? On the contrary, do we instead commit these acts in order to fulfill some human longing to gain fame and recognition for acts of kindness? These questions posed by the poem force us to analyze our own intentions while also examining the warrior's. To conclude, we summarize our dissection on the matter of Beowulf and his moral ambiguity. While it's not entirely clear what the warrior's true intentions are within the character's heart, it is abundantly clear that the primary desire throughout his ventures and feats is the acquisition of fame and riches. This revelation shines a polarizing light on the titular character's journey, and the reasoning behind it. Although despite his selfish intentions, Beowulf performed an abundance of good for the ones he loved, and the innocent masses whom suffered so greatly at the hands of evils abound. And with this information, we conclude that Beowulf, while still forever cemented as a legendary hero, was motivated by his own selfish desire to be hailed as a mighty warrior throughout the ages. And as such, the poem should not only be appreciated as an epic recounting of the hero's journey, but also as a cautionary tale of mankind's inherent need to be recognized for good deeds, which will inevitably lead to our triumph, or our downfall. The choice remains ours.