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Literary Genres

From Sword to Shield: Henderson's Understanding of Heroic Virtue

INTRODUCTION

Myths and epics have always reflected the morals, ethics, struggles and values of their time. Every society, no matter how different their time periods were, desired and struggled for something, herewith, Joseph L. Henderson suggested that the psychology behind myth arises from society and people's intense longings and desires. These aspirations have shaped the contexts and heroes' personalities in the epics and myths for a long time. Through the lens of Henderson, even if Steve Rogers and King Arthur are extremely separated by centuries, it is clear that their representation goes beyond that of a only superhero or knight. Captain America's and King Arthur's personalities transcending the time can be evident explanations to this argument.

According to Jung's theory, (by whom Henderson inspired) there are stages that considerably affect the hero's journey. In the essays I have been reading in order to gain some information for Jung's hero's journey theory, there are some stages like "Ordinary world, Ordeals, But in my opinion, there are especially 4 elements that widely affect the whole storyline. Firstly, the hero gets a call, or gets an instinct that makes the hero go after the duty which will affect his journey. Just like Steve Rogers's being called to be a soldier. (in the first movie) Or, King Arthur's ability to pull off the Sword. After getting the message, heroes may show the inclination to refuse it. Jung suggests that this is because of the ego. There are various helpers to our hero. The initiation makes the hero fight even if he is not guaranteed to be successful. (*Medium, Wikipedia*)

Second, The Shadow theory, The Crisis. It is a kind of transformation. In this stage, the hero keeps fighting with his mentality, psychology. (*appliedjung*) Giving the Captain America example, he learns that S.H.I.E.L.D was taken over by Hydra. His line: "I am just a kid from Brooklyn." (from "*The First Avenger*") clarifies his victory and ensures the peace between him and his mind after the bad situation, which I will be discussing at stage 3. And for King Arthur, we can say Lancelot's betrayal.

Thirdly, the hero overcomes the situation. For instance, Captain America plans some strategies in order to beat his enemy, Hydra. He succeeds, too (*Captain America: Winter Soldier*)

The last one is, Sharing the Elixir. Story of heroes may include too many troubles that make them who they are today. Some of them give up to be a hero while the remaining enjoy being a hero. The experiences they had force them to change. Eventually the hero changes. A change that may even make us forget our hero's first personality. Captain America promises Peggy Carter for a dance after the end of world war. Too many incidents affect this promise, but eventually, Steve keeps his promise and upon succeeding his duty, he goes to the past and dances with Peggy. Yet, the storyline does not always have to be with a happy ending, King Arthur gets involved in this. Camelot, his beloved lands where he builds with so many pains, efforts, collapses.



From the view of Henderson, myths are not only a mirror to the society in which they were created in, but also people's search for their psychological needs and wishes. By embracing ideals, struggles, fears and encouragement, the heroic archetype gives people moral support in their woeful and hard times. By examining one of the stories that feature heroes especially through Henderson's lens, we may often agree with him. Embarking on the journey of King Arthur, filled with majestic and profound meanings, can be a good way to understand the idea of Henderson. King Arthur's creation is a result of a strong leader, moral and ethic searching that were in European people's heart for a very long time. His story was shaped accordingly by these longings and wishes. And examining Captain America, being a weak and thin man, we can see how he gets rid of this situation and becomes one of the strongest soldiers in World War II, which can be tied more with the modern world. Also, he is a figure that tries to build hope walls and demolish desperation in people's hard times like war and fights.

Both Captain America and King Arthur are destined by fate to guide their people. Although their creation's origin lies in the hidden yearnings of their people, the difference between them is obvious at times. Their origins and perspective of heroism are different from each other. This, largely, is a result of the time periods they came out of. King Arthur presents the ideals of justice, nobility and virtue meanwhile Captain America presents self-sacrifice, devotion and freedom in the 20th century. However both of them answer the people's claims, while King Arthur is concerned with his people, justice and land, Camelot, Captain America generally concerned with freedom and dark times that were spent with war. Also, considering their similarities it is obvious that both Captain America and King Arthur are symbols of hope apart from their warrior-identities. Their storyline deeply includes justice, a better system and freedom. While King Arthur leads with the moral of pride and knighthood, Steve Rogers's ethics are freedom and devotion. Both Captain America and King Arthur's heart beat for no selfishness, but for the good for their people. They are both altruistic heroes. That is why if King Arthur was written again in modern times he would be good friends with Captain America. They were both created in very different times but the morals and the psychology that made them almost the same. Their differences are a result of the evolving of the time, sociocultural and may even be technology's development. As we can not expect heavy technological traces in ancient or medieval heroes' stories. But as the time period changes, some of the features can be added along with these changed lifestyles, cultures.

Examining through philosophical ways, their weapons also carry deep symbols that come from eternal ideas. Excalibur, King Arthur's weapon, is not merely a piece of steel it also carries the symbol of divine rights, justice and strong leader. No matter how strong Excalibur is, the sword never seeks blood, war. It would only seek blood in a situation that lacked justice, divine rights. The sword, Excalibur, represented as protector of the weak, and divine land, Camelot. Moreover, it is Excalibur that brings King Arthur to life in our time. Still we can see Henderson's ideals. A search and looking for a leader with justice in that time. While talking about Captain America, the shield is an obvious symbol for protection already. Unlike Excalibur, however the sword's purpose is not to hurt others who don't deserve it, shield is not even a weapon to attack. Shield's made of unbreakable materials symbolizes the eternity of sacrifice and selflessness. The weapon's main duty is to protect innocent ones. Also, Captain America's shield not only stands as a protection to his people, but also for the timeless and breathing ideas that purpose into fight. Excalibur and shield symbolizes both of the hero's physiological impressions. While the sword carries the meaning of justice, right and power, the shield apart from these features, symbolizes protection and peace. The sword strikes for honor, the shield stands for the helpless. With the view of Jungian, the shield and the sword beyond their material, metal form, emerge as a symbol that can be tied with human



mind, psychology and collective unconscious. Every age forges its own hero and those heroes have their weapons filled with their people's ambitions and wishes.

Looking through the lens of Henderson, heroism is not always an inherent characteristic, it can also be gained through struggles and experiences. And perspective of struggles and experiences changes with time. Looking through understanding of heroism in modern and traditional times, the latter one is generally filled with heroes that have owned their hero traits since they were born, for instance King Arthur, on the contrary, modern age's heroes' powers or abilities blossom and grow with time, just like Captain America. The reason for this, at the ancient times, the perspective of a hero gifted with power by Divine was generally accepted. And a Hero was defined with physical strength and a strong mindset, representing as a protector of society, or their people. Besides this, in modern times, with the rise of technology's rise, the perspective of heroism has greatly changed. The focus switched to self-freedom and character development. Modern heroes also protect the innocent ones, but while doing this they also focus on their character growth, for instance Captain America at first, was a man who was terribly weak and with the world war he grew into a strong soldier with a serum that made him with a lot of abilities. (Can be seen in Captain America's "*The First Avenger*") These abilities include quick-mindedness, quick decision-maker and apart from his physical strength he became able to calculate trigonometric ratios very well, that's why his shield always comes back to him whenever he throws it. Moreover, in the Modern era, heroes generally are defined with their intelligence rather than their capability to conquer or fight. Society's needs are also an important factor. In ancient or medieval times, the threats were very different from today. For example, external threats, impotent leaders. But today, common worries can be counted as freedom, rights and equality.

In the final reckoning however the time changes, understanding of heroism changes the base mostly stays the same: human psychology. In this light, Henderson's view is so agreeable. People created myths. Either to fulfill their people with hope, or give them the leader they have always yearned for. Captain America's being a strong soldier in contrast to his weak mental and King Arthur's land of justice Camelot can be good options for examples. No matter how time changes, we will always be able to connect two heroes from the past and from the future. Captain America is the King Arthur of the modern world, as King Arthur is the Captain America of the Ancient world.



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