

# A Comparison of Beowulf and Achilles as National Characters

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## A Comparison of Beowulf and Achilles as National Characters.

Among all primitive people there is great need for warriors and hence a tendency to honor the warrior and to celebrate his deeds in poetry and song. Myths and legends gradually cluster about some great hero until at last he comes to embody the ideals of the nation to which he belongs. Beowulf and Achilles are two such representatives of national characteristics, and in their lives and deeds we may trace the prototypes which at an early period influenced the development of the Teuton and the Greek.

Both of these characters are represented as being pre-eminently brave and strong in battle. Achilles is given such appellations as "waster of cities," (Iliad p. 154) "man of valor," (Iliad p. 164) "swift-footed," (Iliad p. 314) "manslayer" (Iliad p. 216.) and many others of the same sort. We are told that he was the greatest warrior among the Danaans and that even his appearance and the sound of his voice "spread terror unspeakable among the men of Troy." (Iliad p. 372.) He is said to be exceeding mighty above all mankind (Iliad p. 432.) and his bodily strength is well illustrated by the description of his struggle with the river Scamandros: "Then he grasped



a tall fair-grown elm, and it fell uprooted and tore away all the bank." (Iliad p. 422.) Himself goddess born, he is an especial favorite of the gods who frequently give him aid in times of dire need as when Poseidon and Athena help him escape from the river Skamandros.

(Iliad p. 424) Achilles' armor is celebrated for its quality and when it is stripped from the shoulders of Patroklos (Iliad p. 366) his goddess mother Thetis has Hephaistos make him a new armor and glittering arms. (Iliad p. 385.)

In like manner Beowulf is represented as being a man of such fine appearance that the coast warden

declares he has never seen a "greater earl on the earth" and he feels sure that "unless his countenance belie him, that is no ordinary man". (Beowulf p. 21.) Beowulf seems to consider war the worthiest of occupations for he says, "All my life will I wage warfare, while lasts this sword which has often served me early and late." (Beowulf p. 120.) He was not a quarrelsome fellow, however, for in his dying speech he says that he has "sought out no wily quarrels." (Beowulf p. 129.) The appellations applied to Beowulf are of a less savage and cruel sort than those used in describing Achilles. Instead of being described by such

adjectives as "cruel" or "man-slaying" he is designated by such epithets as "honored warrior", (Beowulf p. 87.) "the hero blessed with victory" (Beowulf p. 66.) and "dear Beowulf." (Beowulf p. 61.) In one place where his bravery in battle is thought of he is called "the war-wolf" and it is said that he came off from the battle "by his own strength swimming the waves; upon his arm he had thirty suits of armor, when all alone he went down to the sea." (Beowulf p. 113.) "In his strength," the poet says, "he was the best of men in his day of this life, noble and mighty." (Beowulf p. 19.) Hrothgar says that he knew him as a boy and

that he has the strength of thirty men in his grip. (Beowulf p. 26.) His strength and endurance are shown by the statement that he swam seven days and nights in the ice cold sea, and on that occasion killed nine mixies. (Beowulf p. 36.) When he dived down through the water to kill Grendel's mother "it was the space of a day ere he got sight of the bottom." (Beowulf p. 75.) Finally as an old man it was his very strength which became the cause of his death. "Too strong was the hand, as I have heard, which by its blow overtaxed all swords whatsoever." (Beowulf, p. 127) The blow which he dealt the

fire dragon broke his sword  
 and he died from his wounds  
 after cutting the serpent asunder  
 in the middle with his  
 short sword. (Beowulf p. 128.) Like  
 Achilles he has celebrated  
 arms which no one else can  
 use to as great advantage  
 as he. When hunting the good  
 sword lent him by Unferth  
 failed him in time of need,  
 the Ruler of men granted  
 him that he saw "an old  
 powerful sword hanging  
 on the wall." (Beowulf p. 87.)  
 Several other allusions are  
 made to the fact that God  
 helped Beowulf, and the  
 poet says concerning the  
 fight with Grendel that  
 Ecgtheow's son would have  
 perished had not "Holy God,

the wise Lord, brought victory to pass." (Beowulf p. 77.)

Like most great warriors of antiquity Beowulf and Achilles are both great boasters. When we consider how self-esteem was regarded by the Greeks and Romans, it is not surprising to find them putting boastful speeches into the mouths of their heroes. Cicero does not hesitate to give due credit to himself for exposing Cataline and saving the city; Horace is by no means niggardly in his praise of his own poetry; and Caesar's powers of composition seem to be about equally divided between describing the strength of the Gauls

and telling what a decided victory he won over them.

Beowulf's boasting impresses us as being merely the frank statement of what he and all his associates recognize as true concerning himself. There is no attempt to make himself appear greater than he is and he fulfils all his boasts. He is so frank, in fact, that we never even wish he had left it to some one else to tell of his deeds. Through all his successful career Beowulf remains untinged with haughtiness or foolish pride. Hrothgar says, "The fame of thee, my friend Beowulf, is spread abroad among every people far and wide."

Thou dost hold it all with  
 patience, yea, all thy might  
 with prudence of mind!"

(Beowulf p. 84.) This is one of the  
 surest tests of character.  
 If there is any vanity in  
 a person the surest way to  
 discover it is to make  
 him successful. How many  
 men have never shown their  
 love of praise and petty  
 pride merely because "their  
 lot forbade." Throughout his  
 career Beowulf not only  
 shows no tendency to over-  
 estimate his own abilities;  
 but he is always ready to  
 give credit to whom credit  
 is due. He says of his  
 fight with Grendel's mother  
 that he would hardly have  
 escaped alive had not God



shielded him. (Beowulf p. 82.) Beowulf acknowledges his obligation to Hygelac by saying, "Every favor comes from thee." (Beowulf p. 103.) The only instance in which Beowulf's boasting displeases us is when he tells about his swimming match with Breca. Beowulf's boast that he will show Grendel the strength and courage of the Geats has a defiant ring. (Beowulf p. 36.) This is the only time Beowulf displays any anger toward a fellow man; but his frank disposition leads him to quickly forgive Unferth's insinuations and we find him, before he went down into the mere to kill Grendel's

mother, willing to Unferth  
 "The old heirloom, the woun-  
 drous wavy sword of tempered  
 blade." (Beowulf p. 74.)

In contrast with Beowulf's  
 boasting Achilles boasting  
 seems self conscious. It is  
 the result of vanity rather  
 than mere child-like frank-  
 ness and, although what he  
 says of himself is true, it  
 is nevertheless repugnant.  
 There is always present that  
 emulation which is repugnant  
 wherever found. Achilles had  
 boasted that he would not  
 fight till Hector should  
 come near his hut with  
 consuming fire, (Iliad p. 180) and  
 to make good his boast he  
 refrains from war until  
 many of the Trojans have

bitten the earth because of his  
 wrath. (Iliad p. 389.) He boasts to  
 Patroklos that if the Trojans  
 should even see the visor of  
 his helm shining hard by,  
 they would flee swiftly and  
 fill the watercourses with  
 the dead. (Iliad p. 316.) When  
 he offers the prizes at the  
 celebration of Patroklos' funeral  
 he says confidently, "If in  
 some other's honor we  
 Achaians were now holding  
 our games it would be I  
 who should win the first  
 prize and bear it to my  
 hut." (Iliad p. 458.) This and  
 other passages of like tenor  
 impress one as being  
 genuine boasting unmitigated  
 by any <sup>or</sup> attenuating circum-  
 stances.

The attitude of Achilles and Beowulf toward woman, although mentioned only incidentally, may well be considered in this connection since it serves to show the status of woman in the two civilizations. Achilles' ideals of woman are low. He regards her as so much chattel to be given as the reward of valor. (Iliad p. 6.) He speaks of the women he has won by his spear when he sacked the rich cities about Troy as he would of so much booty taken from the enemy. (Iliad p. 376.) When Odysseus requests him to appease his wrath against Agamemnon for taking Briseis away, Achilles says, "Do then the sons of Athens

alone of all mortal men love their wives? ..... I too loved mine with all my heart, though. but the captive of my spear" (Iliad p 171.) This sounds very well but the character of his love is shown a few pages later where he says, "Would that Artemis had slain her (Briseis) with her arrow at the ships, on the day whereon I took her to me, when I spoiled Lyrnessos; so should not then so many Achaians have bitten the wide earth beneath their enemies' hands, because of my exceeding wrath" (Iliad p. 388.) This attitude toward woman is not confined to Achilles alone but pervades the entire

atmosphere of the poem.

When we pass from the Greek to the Teutonic people we enter a different social atmosphere. The worth of the individual is emphasized, and woman shares the freedom so dear to this sturdy race. Beowulf treats woman with that same frankness and honesty which characterizes his relations with men. He and his comrades show a marked reverence for woman and a deference to her counsel such as was unknown to the Greeks. Queen Heathrow is present at the feast and passes the cup. She greets Beowulf kindly and thanks God

that a deliverer has come. She is well-pleased with Beowulf's resolution to accomplish noble deeds or abide his end in the mead-hall. (Beowulf p. 37.) After Beowulf has killed Grendel and they again feast in the hall, Wealhtheow presents Beowulf with a collar and admonishes him, "Prosper well; show thyself strong; and be kind in thy counsel to these youths." (Beowulf p. 61) This speech is worthy of a high-minded, freedom loving woman, such as can be produced only in a civilization which holds high ideals of womanhood.

Probably the greatest point of contrast between

Beowulf and Achilles is the altruistic spirit of the one and the utter selfishness of the other. The motive of Beowulf in crossing the seas and undertaking the combat with Grendel was an altruistic one. (Beowulf p. 22.) To cleanse Heorot of such a monster was a dangerous undertaking and yet Beowulf is anxious to undertake it for the Scyldings and since he has heard that Grendel uses no weapons he declares that he also will fight empty handed "so that the heart of Hygelac, my lord, may be gladdened because of me" (Beowulf p. 29.) Achilles would have been utterly incapable of expressing



such a thought. His only anxiety would have been to gladden his own heart by increasing his own renown. Later in the poem we learn that it was to fulfil the desire of the people that Beowulf put out to sea. (Beowulf p. 37.) No better instance of Beowulf's consideration for the feelings of others can be found than the fact that when Hrothgar offered him Hunting, the sword which had failed him at the critical moment, he accepted it thankfully and "uttered no word in blame of that edged sword." We must agree with the poet's comment that "he was a great hearted man" (Beowulf p. 88.) When Beowulf is

about to return home he thanks Hrothgar for entertaining him and his followers so well and promises future help if need arises. "If", he says, "I learn beyond the course of the waters that thy neighbors beset thee sore, as did thine enemies in days gone by, I will bring a thousand thanes and warriors to help thee." (Beowulf p. 89.) Hrothgar's thankfulness to Beowulf shows how great was the favor he had received. Hrothgar says, "Thy great heart pleaseth me more and more, dear Beowulf" (Beowulf p. 90.) When Beowulf returned home he gave all the gifts which he had received from Hrothgar to

his king Hygelac. (Beowulf p. 103.)  
 Even in the hour of death  
 Beowulf's thoughts are for the  
 welfare of his people. He returns  
 thanks to God that ere his  
 death day he has been able  
 to win such treasures for  
 his people and to Wiglaf  
 says, "Fulfil ye now the needs  
 of the people." (Beowulf p. 132.)

How different is the  
 character of Achilles, always  
 jealous of his own honor  
 and willing to sacrifice his  
 dearest friends to advance  
 his own interests. When he  
 finally permits Patroklos to  
 wear his armor forth to battle  
 he selfishly admonishes him,  
 "yet long not thou apart  
 from me to fight with the  
 war-loving Trojans; thereby

wilt thou diminish mine honor" (Iliad p. 317.) Toward such a man we feel as Patroklos did when he said, "The grey sea bare thee, and the sheer cliffs, so untoward is thy spirit." (Iliad p. 315.) Because Agamemnon took from him his meed of valor Achilles sulks in his tent and refuses to protect the Danaans from the attacks of manslaying Hector. (Iliad p. 180.) When the Achaians are hard pressed and about to perish Odysseus appeals to Achilles for help. "Up then!", he says, "if thou art minded even at the last to save the failing sons of the Achaians from the war din of the Trojans" (Iliad p. 168.) But Achilles is not minded to save even the last remnant,

and all appeals to altruistic motives are wasted on him. He even prays to the gods to destroy both the Trojans and the Achaeans that he and Patroklos alone might have the honor of undoing the coronal of Troy. (Iliad p. 317.)

Notwithstanding all appeals for help from his perishing countrymen, notwithstanding the fact that already many noble warriors had bitten the dust because of his wrath, Achilles stands idly by and allows the work of destruction to go on about the ships. It is only after his friend Patroklos has been slain by Hector that he desires to go into the combat and then from no noble motives but merely.

To vent his wrath upon a weaker foe. Instead of exercising self-control Achilles is completely mastered by his anger. Love for his countrymen cannot move him; but anger leads him whither it will. Even his generosity impresses one as being only wise egoism. When he gives magnificent prizes to the contestants at the funeral games in honor of Patroklos, we feel that he does so merely to increase the fame of Peleus's son about which he has shown himself so jealous, (Iliad p. 478.) As Nestor says, "Achilles, for all his valiance careth not for the Danaans nor pities them at all. .... He is for reaping alone the reward of his valor, (Iliad p. 226.)"

It is a notable fact that all men, no matter how degraded they may be, still have some sense of honor. Murderers frequently boast of their honesty and say they have never stolen a penny. So a band of outlaws may have a rigid code of ethics which they scrupulously follow in their dealings with one another. It is from this principle that the saying "there is honor even among thieves" originates. Crime seems frequently to be the result of a conscience which is undeveloped with reference to certain questions of conduct. Achilles shows a certain sense of honor when he declares to wily Odysseus that he will speak openly the things that

are in his heart. "For," he says, "hateful to me even as the gates of hell is he that hideth one thing in his heart and uttereth another." (Iliad p. 170.) One would hardly expect such a denunciation of deception from a man who has prayed the gods to destroy his countrymen that he might thereby win greater renown for himself. Achilles nurses his wrath till it finally becomes a point of honor with him not to desist from his anger till Hector come to his ship with destroying fire. (Iliad p. 316.) He rejoices in the implacable spirit which he possesses and says proudly that his heart swells with wrath whenever



he thinks of the treatment  
 which Atreides has given him.  
 (Iliad p. 180.) In estimating the  
 character of the individual in  
 such cases as this, we must  
 remember that the ethics of  
 that period sanctioned many  
 things which are now con-  
 sidered morally culpable. For  
 example, it was considered  
 a mark of moral courage  
 to avenge the wrongs of a  
 friend upon the perpetrator.  
 Thus Achilles merely follows  
 a custom of the time when  
 he says, "My soul biddeth  
 me ~~abandon~~ no longer nor  
 abide among men, if Hector  
 be not first smitten by my  
 spear and yield his life,  
 and pay for his slaughter  
 of Patroclus. Now go I forth

that I may light on the destroyer of him I loved, on Hector; then will I accept my death whensoever Zeus willeth to accomplish it." This willingness to give his life in what he considers a just cause has a genuine heroic ring about it.

Beowulf in like manner possesses a strong sense of honor but it takes a more humane form than in Achilles. This sense of honor is shown most clearly after the death of Hygelac when Hygd and all the people wished Beowulf to become king. But all their persuasion could not influence Beowulf to do what he considered dishonorable. Instead of becoming king he served Heardred as a sort

of regent till the young prince was old enough to rule alone. (Beowulf p. 114.) Thus he shows his loyalty and thankfulness to Hygelac for the favors he had received from him. Had all royal personages possessed Beowulf's sense of honor many of the darkest pages in the catalogue of crimes would never have been written. Beowulf's honor as a warrior will not permit him to carry arms when he goes into the combat with Grendel because he has heard "that the monster in his rashness reckes not of weapons." (Beowulf p. 29.) Beowulf had high ideals concerning what the true warrior should be. The do or die spirit

is expressed in his resolve, "I shall bravely accomplish noble deeds or abide mine end in this mead hall" (Beowulf p. 37.) To such a man death is more welcome than dishonor. Such willingness to sacrifice even his life for the sake of his ideals is worthy of the highest type of Stoic philosopher. This is the spirit which throughout the course of the ages has inspired ~~inspired~~ martyrs to endure the flames for conscience's sake. It is the spirit which has guided the philosopher in his search for truth and sustained the political and social reformer through all the abuse and persecution heaped upon him, It is the spirit which must

animate every great movement so long as humanity remains true to itself, and one age brands as heresy the views which become the orthodoxy of succeeding generations.

The most repulsive trait of Achilles character is his inhumanity. There are some things which we can pardon in a character when we consider the age and country in which he lived; but with all our charity we can never bring ourselves to look with leniency upon a disposition so fierce that it is not satisfied with slaying its enemy but must heap insults and indignities upon the senseless clay. It is related of Charles I that when

visiting Luther's grave, one of his attendants suggested to him that the body of the reformer ought to be dug up and burned. Although the emperor had relentlessly persecuted the Protestants he replied chivalrously, "No! I make war on the living, not on the dead." (Barne's General History p. 442.)

The savagery of Achilles in dragging Hector's body around the walls of Troy has become a household tale, until Achilles very name has become synonymous with cruelty.

We are very apt to form our judgment of a character by some one or perhaps a few prominent traits. Thus if we find in anyone some trait of character which we

admire, we are inclined to idealize that person. This perhaps accounts for the sense of disappointment which we often experience at some unexpected action on the part of a friend. We often in like manner form an aversion for a person because of some one unpleasant trait. When we picture Achilles, boasting that because of his wrath he would "cut the throats of twelve noble sons of the men of Troy" before Patroklos' funeral pyre, (Iliad p. 376) and "drag thither Hector to give raw unto dogs to devour," (Iliad p. 455.) we lose sight of whatever good traits he possesses and he stands forth before us, the incarnation of ferocity.

There is nothing in Achilles which appeals to our sympathies. He impresses us as being a cold, inhuman fighting machine at which we may gaze in wonder but which we cannot love. On the other hand Beowulf is so humane that we lose sight of the warrior and love the man. He develops into a noble man, not by the intervention of the gods at the proper time, but by a gradual growth just as each one of us must develop. When he was young, as we are told, he was not much <sup>esteemed</sup> either by the people or by the king. They thought him a stolid, unwarlike fellow; and he endured much sorrow on that account. (Beowulf p. 104.)



By performing good deeds he grew in strength and force of character. When we contemplate his matured character, we feel that his greatness is the result of his own efforts and this together with his frank, unselfish disposition gives him a strong hold upon our affections. We feel that he uses war only as a means to something better. He does not delight in slaughter purely for its own sake. When he goes out to kill it is always because some enemy threatens the public welfare. He is in league with the good element in its strife with the powers of darkness. Perhaps in this is to be found the reason why he appeals to us so strongly. In everyone

is the desire to see the good triumph over the evil and the hope that virtue will some day be rewarded. Hence, since Beowulf champion's the cause of the good he appeals to one of the universal instincts of the race. With awakened interest and active sympathy we follow him through his various adventures, glorying in his victories and rejoicing in his courage until at last he crowns his life by an heroic death.

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