

Epic vs. Modern Heroes

While “Have at thee!” the Arthurian battle cry from Monty Python’s *Search for the Holy Grail*, is a far a-hem cry from the modern day hero’s, the essence remains the same. Many aspects of culture have been wholly altered, but society’s quest for a hero has remained. Each people of the ancient times had a matchless idol that was unto his self the embodiment of cultural perfection. In more recent eras, where societies vary exceedingly, people have relied on scores of heroes. The United States is deemed the “melting pot” of the world due to the vast number of cultures she houses. Should she not, then, have a vast number of heroes, each one serving an essential role in society? Though modern culture does not choose one hero to exemplify cultural perfection; instead, there are many, each responding to a different call from each people.

Well documented ancient epic heroes include: Beowulf, King Arthur, and Sir Gawain. These legendary men fought to protect their people and their families. The men were the personification of loyalty, courage, and strength. The ancient epic hero usually was deemed cultural perfection; other men idolized these heroes, striving to gain their position of flawlessness. Societies seemed to balance on the tips of heroes’ swords; epic poetry and ancient prose read as if heroes were the spinal column of a civilization. And perhaps in an age of heightened supernatural belief it was just so. If ancient times had the supernatural, modern times have their own beasts and monsters to cringe and seek shelter from. In an age where millions are dying from treatable diseases, and a billion more are pointlessly starving, it seems that if ever a need for heroes was, it is now.

Modern heroes come in all shapes and sizes, even the anti-government brand. Modern society is crazy about the anti-hero, especially in entertainment. Many protagonists in movies are, in fact, characters that, while they do not embody cultural perfection, they are nonetheless idolized. Consider Rambo, he is strong, courageous, determined... and is being hunted by the police. Unto himself, he is exceptionally heroic, but he is anti-government. In the film *Reservoir Dogs*, the most heroic character is a for-hire jewel thief, while the most despicable character is a policeman. Mr. Orange, an undercover cop, is shot during the hold-up of a diamond store. Mr. White, the unlawful thief, risks life and limb throughout the entire movie to protect this cop who is trying to put him away. When the surviving members of the thieving crew show up at the rendezvous, yelling and shooting off about there having been a rat, Mr. White stands up for the bleeding, dying cop, saying “You’re making a terrible mistake I’m not going to let you make. Joe, if you kill that man you die next.” Mr. White takes a bullet for the man who sold him out. In this case, the heroic character was not the upstanding citizen. Mr. White was, however, someone anyone would feel safe calling his or her hero.

Anti-heroes do not solely exist in the fictional world. There are people in the real world, everyday who fit the anti-hero description. They are... the Mob. In ancient times loyalty was purest form of respect. It was a way of life. One was loyal to his or her family, govern, king, and God. Hand in hand with loyalty, comes the right to revenge. The Mob is one of the few “societies” that has reserved that tradition. For example: when a family member is assassinated, it is not only the right, but also the duty of the surviving family to avenge that death. This loyalty to one’s own, coupled with the fierce determination to protect them, are incredibly heroic qualities. Organized crime

families are oohed and ahed by the press and pop culture, and have their own fans. While these people are not ideal role models, they possess heroic qualities worthy of aspiration.

Modern culture does not love only the anti-hero; modern culture loves nearly anything it finds praiseworthy. This encompasses a wide spectrum. At the furthest end from the organized crime, are the “do-gooders”. There is even another spectrum, just within this genre of hero. At the far ends of this more specialized spectrum range world-wide figures such as Princess Diana to less known, community heroes. Princess Diana is perhaps the most famous woman in the world; her death is mourned by millions. She is most well known for her campaigns against several social issues including AIDS, poverty, drug-problems, and homelessness. Her work to raise awareness for these issues has put her down in history, and has made her a hero to the world. However, heroes do not have to be world heroes to be classified heroes. For example: “There was the high school football player who gave up his senior season to donate one of his kidneys to save his grandmother. Or even more remarkable, 18-year-old Keisha Thomas, a black girl who threw herself over a white man with a confederate flag shirt who was being beaten at a KKK rally in Ann Arbor.”. These wholly unselfish acts make these people heroes. The ability to put others before oneself is a somewhat rare quality. In an era where everyone seems to have his or her own agenda, to see someone put his or herself on the line for another... is a beautiful thing, something to be admired, and extraordinarily heroic.

A person can be a hero to his or her family, or to the world. A jewel thief or a Mob member can be exceptionally heroic. The greatest difference in the hero of today and the hero of times past is the number and social standing. In times past, the hero was cultural perfection; today anyone can be a hero. In that aspect, we have progressed as a civilization. Now there is an ever growing number of heroes that societies can idolize and imitate. With ever more idols, there comes, ideally, a boost in a society’s overall goodness. If each individual was encouraged to pick a personal hero, perhaps the world would have fewer problems.