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Foundations II

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A Hero’s Sacrifice

The epic poems *Beowulf* and *Lancelot* are both characterized by their protagonists' quest, against all odds, to reach their goal. As part of their respective journeys, there are instances where the two heroes make monumental sacrifices when facing opposing choices. The dragon-slaying episode in *Beowulf* (lines 5645-5930) contrasts sharply with the cart episode in *Lancelot* (lines 320-500) where one hero gives his everything for fame, and the other gives up fame for his everything. By comparing the nature of their respective sacrifices and their outcome, we can get meaningful insights into the character motivations and the values they hold dear.

Beowulf disregards reason and his own life in the pursuit of accolades for defeating the dragon all by himself, and though this act might seem unwise to a modern reader, it is in sync with the existing norms of Beowulf's society. He instructs his men not to help him in the fight when he says,

Men at arms, remain here on the barrow,

…………………

This fight is not yours,

nor is it up to any men except me

to measure his strength against the monster (2529 – 2534)

Beowulf makes it clear that absolutely no one, except for him, has what it takes to fight the dragon. His warriors are there to serve as mere chroniclers of his legendary fight. It is almost like he is making sure that any external help should not dilute his victory if he wins over the dragon. Beowulf shows an insouciant attitude for his own life by saying, "I shall win the gold / by my courage, or else mortal combat, / doom of battle, will bear your lord away" (2535-2537). It is all in for the lord of Geats, and even the risk of losing his life cannot stop him. Beowulf is relying on his strength, and his alone, to fight the dragon, and it is acceptable to him if he meets his maker in this pursuit of glory and gold. The act of forgoing his warriors' assistance, the likes of which he has shown earlier by going weaponless against Grendel, fits his blasé attitude of ignoring rationality for the sake of maximum glory. It is worth mentioning here that Beowulf's attitude, though reckless, is highly appreciated in his time. A society built on courage and daring will view Beowulf's exploit respectfully. He is not doing something entirely out of line with society's expectations from a warrior. Hence Beowulf’s disregard of reason and sacrifice of life is not so rash as it might appear on the face value. As per the prevailing social mores, a higher ideal of honor than the preservation of life is what he serves. For Beowulf, even if his actions go against the consideration of self-preservation and rationality, it is worth the risk for bigger boasts as that is what his society expects.

Lancelot, too, goes against reason, but he sacrifices reputation for the sake of love, and though understandable to us, this move goes directly against the prevailing societal norms of his time. Riding in the cart is injurious to a person's social standing, as evidenced in the following lines: "There was only one (cart), and they used it / For every kind of criminal" (325-326) and "Their reputations / Were lost, … / … they lost all honor" (355 – 337). For a knight in King Arthur's court, nothing can be more damnable than riding in the cart reserved for the scourge of the society. For Lancelot, riding in the cart for information on Guinevere will be a massive blow to his honor. The following lines convey the inner battle Lancelot fights against reason for his love:

Reason, which warred

With love, warned him to take care;

It taught and advised him never

To attempt anything likely

To bring him shame or reproach. (364-368)

It is clear that prudence governs him to think of his respect before doing something so disastrous. For a knight of his stature, it is unreasonable, no matter what the cause, to bring shame and disrepute to his name. To top it all, the cart driver never gives any concrete information on Guinevere's whereabouts and only mentions that by riding in the cart "You might find out … / What's happened to the queen" (357-358). There are absolutely no assurances, and it could all go to waste with his name irreversibly tarnished. We can argue that riding in the cart is a desperate yet necessary move on Lancelot's part to achieve his goal. However, a sacrifice so huge just for the sake of love is the last thing 12th-century society expects out of a Knight. His irrationality, though acceptable to us, is unacceptable to his society. It is interesting to see here how the senselessness of Beowulf’s and Lancelot's decisions depends on the lens of the society, modern or the one prevalent in the middle ages; we are viewing it from. In Lancelot's case, his gambit for love against the dictates of rationality proves costly for his image especially considering his times.

Love guides Lancelot in discounting reason, but Beowulf's motivation for doing the same is his ardent desire for renown and setting an example for people to follow. The following lines stand testimony to his drive for fame: "I am old / but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight / for the glory of winning" (2511-2514). As a king of his land and people, his desire for being revered long after he is gone is his principal mover. To achieve this goal, he wants to seize the opportunity to fight against a dragon and lay claim on the treasure it guards. Praise from his subjects and the accompanying fame is so important to him that just before succumbing to his injuries, he orders Wiglaf to have a commemorative structure built in his honor: "Order my troop to construct a barrow / … / and be a reminder among my people" (2802-2804). Even in his dying moments, the thing he cares about the most is how he could remain in the memory of people after his death. *Glory of winning* and *reminder among my people* are the keywords here, around which Beowulf's entire psyche revolves. Achieving immortality via fame is an integral part of his value system and motivation for his sacrifice. The nature of his sacrifice has both outward and inward aspects where he gets glory from his last act, but at the same time, he also sets an example for his people. His sacrifice inspires the public and any future ruler who wants to be seen as a great king. Simply put, creating a legacy and respect from future generations are what Beowulf strives for in his last outing.

Lancelot's take on his public impression stands diametrically opposite to that of Beowulf's as he knowingly commits an act that brings him shame and dishonor, revealing his personal beliefs. As soon as the cart carrying him enters the castle, all the people there start associating the knight with any number of crimes they can think of: "What did they catch him doing? / Is he just a thief? Or maybe / A murderer? Was he beaten in combat?"(414-416). These are not just mere speculations but quite possibly the reality Lancelot has to live with for the rest of his life. Jumping into the cart is career suicide and Lancelot knows that well. However, he is ready to receive the brickbats of the public in the quest for his love. Lancelot also faces discrimination when he asks the reason for not being given better of the two beds in the lodge:

"It’s not for you," she declared

"To demand such things. Any

Knight who's ridden in a cart

Has lost his honor forever.

You have no right to ask

Such questions and expect to be answered (483-488)

The lady running the lodge insults Lancelot and even reprimands him for entertaining such thoughts in his mind. The honor of using the best of the lodging is only for a reputable person, and a Knight who has ridden in the cart could never avail that comfort. Such scathing criticism is hurtful to Lancelot but also reveals a lot about himself and the nature of his sacrifice. His quest is something very personal, and he holds the ideal of love higher than honor. Lancelot’s sacrifice has a different flavor than Beowulf's, as Lancelot's motive is more inwardly directed to fulfill what he feels right rather than caring about the public opinion. The insults are not something Lancelot can be oblivious to and hence shows the level of humiliation he is ready to endure for what he believes in.

Unlike Lancelot, any action bringing disrepute to his name is inconceivable to Beowulf. However, his last outing to win a favorable public opinion does bring a catastrophe to his kingdom and leaves us questioning the real intent of his sacrifice. Beowulf’s original intention to fight against the dragon is revenge for his subjects killed by the dragon:

The lord of Geats took eleven comrades

and went in a rage to reconnoitre.

By then he had discovered the cause of the affliction

being visited on the people. (2401-2404)

Beowulf takes the challenge to fight the dragon to fulfill his responsibility as a king. He takes his soldiers with him on the mission to get rid of the anathema troubling his people. However, it will not be incorrect to say that the desire for fame soon takes over his mind leaving the concern for people an afterthought. Even before facing the dragon, Beowulf has some cognizance that this act would most likely be his last challenge: "He was sad at heart, / unsettled yet ready, sensing his death" (2419-2420). To him, an honorable death means more than the adversity his subjects have to face in his absence. Moreover, as per the Scandinavian ideals of his time, revenge is the greatest service he can do for his people. In the aftermath of Beowulf's death, the crisis looming large on Geats is well captured in the following lines:

Now war is looming

over our nation, soon it will be known

to Franks and Frisians, far and wide,

that the king is gone. (2911-2914)

Beowulf has essentially left his kingdom unguarded against aggressors. With Beowulf gone, his countrymen will be without their great leader to guide and save them from the enemy state's attacks. Being remembered as a great warrior king is Beowulf's driving force to bear arms against the dragon. Any consideration for the state of his kingdom after he is gone does not seem to have crossed his mind. This episode is an intriguing overlap of selfless and selfish acts and presents another way of looking at Beowulf’s sacrifice. On the one hand, we can think of Beowulf’s fight against the dragon as a selfless king protecting and avenging his people. On the other hand, the same act seems to be driven more by the lust of fame with little thought for the well-being of the people. Under the guise of fulfilling his royal responsibilities, Beowulf's pursuit of personal glory extracts a heavy toll on his people.

An antithesis to Beowulf’s conduct, Lancelot’s action to ensure the well-being of his ladylove over his honor seems selfless, but a careful examination of his motivation reveals the hidden layers of his sacrifice. Inspired by love, Lancelot listens to his heart as described in the following lines:

He listened

To Love, and quickly jumped in,

Putting all sense of shame

Aside, as love had commanded. (373-376)

At the crossroads of life, Lancelot chooses the path of love over prestige. Though he has full awareness of the aftermath of his decision on his image, he still chooses to follow the calling of love. With love as his master, he follows its order to ride in the cart as Guinevere's rescue is the only thing that matters to him. Though Lancelot’s action paints the picture of a selfless romantic, there is another way of looking at the act from the point of view of a crazed lover. The obsessive, almost selfish nature of Lancelot’s sacrifice can be understood better when compared with Lord Gawain's response to the same situation: "This struck my lord Gawain / As the height of absolute folly, / And he said he wouldn't climb in" (387-389). So great is the stigma associated with riding in the cart that Lord Gawain cannot even fathom the possibility of doing it. The shame of the act is a significant concern to him, and he smartly circumvents the choice by following the cart, keeping the hopes of finding some information on Guinevere alive. Compared to Lord Gawain, Lancelot is so far gone in his passion for his beloved that he chooses to disregard reason and public opinion for Guinevere. Lancelot wants to find his Queen's whereabouts at any cost, and it is not all for altruistic purposes. As seen later in the poem, he consummates his relationship with Guinevere, committing a breach of trust against his King. In this way, the choices that Beowulf and Lancelot take are not that different as both have the element of selfishness mixed with selfless heroics. So, it can be argued here that Lancelot in looking out for his lover’s interest, is also looking out for his own interest, and his selfless sacrifice of honor is also a selfish offering at the altar of love.

In conclusion, the sacrifices Beowulf and Lancelot make are homage to their ideals. Relinquishing his life for everlasting fame, Beowulf forms the archetype of the *knight against dragon* imagery. In Lancelot’s case, giving up honor for love makes him known in all of literature as *The Knight of the Cart*. Seen this way, loss of life and reputation might just be trade-offs for what the heroes get in return. Hence, comparing their sacrifices from this perspective of self-serving altruism reveals the personality of both the characters and provides a deeper understanding of the poems.