

## REFERENCE SUPPLEMENT

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Abridged from

### BEOWULF TO BATMAN: THE EPIC HERO AND POP CULTURE

by Roger B. Rollin

MANY a teacher of English views with trepidation the prospect of introducing members of the present student generation to the study of *Beowulf*. For such students the great old poem of the Anglo-Saxon *scop* may well seem not merely remote, but irrelevant. Even the best among them, those who despite their other real concerns can still be responsive to esthetic or scholarly appeals, may feel that reading *Beowulf* is reading only for art's or history's sake.

Yet these same serious students, when they temporarily put aside their socio-political and academic cares, will watch television programs like "Mission Impossible" or "Star Trek," will follow installments of Steve Canyon or Batman in the comics, or will read Ian Fleming or attend James Bond films. The students themselves, however, (and not a few of their teachers) think of such extracurricular activities as "escape."

But what is "escape"? "Pop romance" (a term that will be used throughout this paper to designate television programs, films, and comic strips in the adventure category) is typically replete with tensions and problems, and those not usually very far removed from present reality.

The "escapism" of pop romance resides paradoxically in the security it generates: we know, deep down in our hearts, that Batman will not be turned into a human shish kebab by The Joker, that Steve Canyon will in the end foil the attempt of the Chinese Reds to defoliate Central Park. It follows that the "escapism" provided by pop romance involves what might be called "value satisfaction," that confirmation or reaffirmation of our value system which results from our seeing this value system threatened, but ultimately triumphant. For at least one of the things that happens when a hero like Batman or Steve Canyon wins out in the end—and not the least important thing—is that we experience at some level the defeat of Evil (as we imagine it) by the Good (as we have learned it). Even though we consciously are aware that such victories do not always occur in reality, there is a part of us which very much wants them to occur. We are of course unwilling to have such victories take place too easily, as the epic poets well realized, for an easy victory not only lacks dramatic force but paradoxically cheapens the value system the victory is to affirm by making it almost irrelevant.

"Escapism" then, connoting a retreat to a state of mindlessness or euphoria, may well be the wrong term to use to justify or to attack anyone's involvement in pop romance.

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Though adventure films, television programs, and comic strips may be only pseudo art or semiart, they need not be more "escapist" than "true" art. Thus, "escape" (into the higher reality of moral truth) can be seen as a function of all forms of art.

That even pop romance is concerned with moral truth—by "incarnating the Good" in its hero figures—is easily shown. The more primitive films, television programs, and comics—those produced mainly for children—explicitly purport to be morality tales: The Lone Ranger was identified as a "champion of justice," for example, and Batman has been plainly if infelicitously described as "fighting for righteousness and apprehending the wrongdoer."

There is still another level at which pop romance, both primitive and sophisticated, incarnates the Good. We tend to admire and identify with Batman, for example, not only because he is clean, upright, reverent, etc., an adult boy scout, square but undeniably good—all the things we should be—but also because he is handsome, athletic, intelligent, and rich—all the things we would like to be. He is the fulfillment of our fantasies as well as of our moral sense. Whatever different values may be stressed in various heroes of pop romance (and there is some variation), they tend to have the basic values of our culture in common. Thus their repeated triumphs, whether we are fully conscious of it or not, can help reinforce our confidence in our value system and encourage our conformity to it.

Neither epic poets nor the creators of pop culture are true cultural revolutionaries. (Even devout Royalists could accept *Paradise Lost*.) Whether Delight or Instruction then is uppermost in the mind of the creator of the fiction, if the fiction is successful the results will likely be the same: the culture will find reiterated in that fiction most of the values it passed on to the creator in the first place. It is almost inevitable, therefore, that pop romance, for example, instruct in spite of itself.

Milton Caniff has said: "The American hero lives in all of us . . . and if we are not all heroes, we are all hero ridden. Descendants of a legend, we persist in identifying with it." To summarize the argument of this paper, if today's students can be made conscious of this truth about themselves by having their attention called to their involvement in pop romance, and if, by analyzing the nature and functions of the hero in pop romance and epic poems, they can begin to perceive significant esthetic and intellectual parallels between the popular and the classic, then their heightened awareness of the unity and the relevance of all art will help make their study of literature easier, more enjoy-

able, and more pointed. To some extent Marshall McLuhan has made even the ordinary student more receptive to such an approach than he might have been a few years ago, and Northrop Frye of course has done even more for the well-read student. And Frye, in addition, is helpful in providing some guidelines by which such an approach can to an extent be systematized.

### I.

In *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), Frye classifies five types of fictive hero, each type being determined "by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same."

Here our concern is with Frye's "Type II" hero: "If superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of *romance*, whose actions are marvelous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended . . ." (p. 33). The fact that these laws frequently seem to be suspended by the hero himself gives the Type II figure a semidivine aura even though he is of earthly mold. Though limited, he is still overwhelmingly powerful and overwhelmingly virtuous. He is, however, capable of error (though seldom of crime or serious sin) and ultimately he is vulnerable. In pop romance Batman is a familiar example of this type.

What the hero is and does in terms of objective reality is less important than what he represents to our inner reality. The local man who saves a child from drowning is of less enduring interest to us than our fictive or historical heroes: the former wants symbolism, and unless local mythopoeia provides him with it, we tend to displace him in our consciousness with the more value-charged heroes we seem to need. The heroes of the great English epics represent attempts by poets of genius to fulfill that need for their own times. In our time, supposedly the age of the "antihero," the writers of pop romance knowingly or unknowingly fulfill the same need.

These analogies between epic and pop heroes can be used to provide one kind of approach to *Beowulf*.

### II.

In his consideration of "The Primitive Heroic Ideal," E. Talbot Donaldson says: "put most simply, the heroic ideal was excellence. The hero-kings strove to do better than anyone else the things that an essentially migratory life demanded . . ." Fighting was of course the primary activity, as it is so often in pop romance, and it is on those few violent hours in *Beowulf's* life when he wins his three great victories that the Anglo-Saxon *scop* concentrates rather than upon his youth or years of kingship. Pop romance is frequently attacked for its own preoccupation with violence, but its critics do not always recognize that violence is seldom gratuitous; as in epic poems it is usually if not always effectively moralized: the resounding "Pow!" as Batman's fist connects with the Joker's jaw signals not only retribution but the reestablishment of moral order.

The plot of the first section of *Beowulf*—the bringing of order to the chaos that is Heorot through the deeds of the stranger-hero, and thus bringing stability and security to a

community near collapse—has been utilized so often as to seem formula by now. The Western, of course, employs it over and over again.

The Western which fixed the stranger-savior most firmly in the imagination of mid-twentieth century America was of course "The Lone Ranger." It is possible that the messianic overtones of the formula which "The Lone Ranger" so obviously played upon were partly responsible for its wide appeal: in times of crisis we look for a deliverer, a *Beowulf* or a Lone Ranger. The vague origins and the sudden departures of such heroes also serve to enhance their legends. These legends in time take on almost religious status, becoming myths which provide the communities not only with models for conduct but with the kind of heightened shared experiences which inspire and unify their members.

The final sequence of *Beowulf*, the hero's fight with the dragon, embodies still another formulaic plot, that of the resident hero who champions the community in its struggle for self-preservation. This hero may or may not be the titular leader of the community, but he is always the *present* exemplification of the primitive kingly ideal (Hrothgar's heroism was in the past). Dodge City, the archetypal community of the television Western, "Gunsmoke," has a mayor, but it is the city's marshal, Matt Dillon, who guarantees its stability and security. Gotham not only has a mayor, but a police commissioner, a police chief, and squads of officers, but it is Batman who defeats the city's dragons.

The law frequently appears to be too complex or too cumbersome to deal with crises, so the hero, whether he is a real or titular king, becomes a law unto himself. Ian Fleming's James Bond, a true primitive hero updated to espionage agent, is "licensed to kill." He is above the law not only of his own community but of the international community as well.

The hero's antagonists, on the other hand, are depicted as being unresponsive to the community and the community's values, even if they happen to be residents. The antagonist may represent an alien community or only the community of the self, but the fact that he acts as a law unto himself is *not* glossed over. The *Beowulf* poet stresses this: Grendel is of the exiled race of Cain, he inhabits that no man's land where the influence of the community ends and what is in effect the jungle begins, and from that dark region he peers at the community and envies its happiness. Though he comes within the pale of the community by gaining control of Heorot, if only during the night, his natural element, his means of doing so puts him beyond the pale. The rules therefore need not apply to him: the only good renegade is a dead renegade.

Primitive heroes do not, however, have *carte blanche*. Although the community may be quite willing to waive *all* of its laws to ensure the defeat of its enemy, the hero cannot, for otherwise he loses face and his force as the repository of the community's values (which supposedly he is struggling to preserve). He can violate some laws—against illegal search and seizure, for example—but he cannot violate others, particularly the unwritten laws of the community: killing the villain can eliminate the expense and delay in the community's vengeance entailed by the

observation of due process, but the execution must take the form of a sword point or a bullet in the villain's chest, not in his back. It is to such a "code of the West" that Beowulf conforms when he undertakes to battle Grendel with his bare hands and Grendel's dam with a sword (a compensation for the disadvantage of fighting under water). This form of chivalry only allows for equalizers—in the "shootdown" it must be .38 against .38. Of course this code is binding upon heroes only; it is one of the crosses they bear but without which they might be difficult to distinguish from their codeless antagonists, the merely instinctual Grendels and cattle rustlers.

The community in both epic and pop romance is not only a social unit but a quasi-religious one. It is that which nurtures, controls, and protects the nonheroes who comprise it: the community giveth and the community taketh away. Its wars are holy wars and its champions become quasi-religious figures. Thus the Unferths or the cowardly shopkeepers whose action or inaction undermines the hero (and thus the community) come close to being not only traitors but apostates.

Invariably this community religion becomes cosmic: in Hrothgar's view Beowulf has been divinely sent to deliver his people from a monster who is "at war with God" (although he appears to give real trouble only to the Geats). And Beowulf himself feels that he is under God's protection. His status as a messiah figure receives the heaviest

stress in the poem's climactic sequence, the fight with the dragon. This "worm" that flies by night, that is associated with fire, that lives somewhere below, shares at least in the archetype of Satan, whom Milton (in the "Nativity Ode") called "the old dragon underground." Beowulf's determination to save his people single-handedly, his going-forth with a band of twelve, one of whom initiated the chain of events which will lead to his death, and the scop's final description of him—"of world-kings the mildest of men and the gentlest"—all suggest an imitation of Christ. The image of the hero as gentle man which seems almost an afterthought in *Beowulf* is close to the formula in pop romance, the classic example being the mild hero (played by Gary Cooper) of the film *High Noon*.

Heroes cannot, however, remain lambs; crises call for lions. And whether they take place in epics or in pop romance, crises usually require violent solutions. Violence indeed seems to be the reality of their worlds and it is in violent situations that the heroes are defined.

One significant difference, however, between *Beowulf* and romance, pop or otherwise, is the distinction between mortality and vulnerability. Heroes like Batman are always being threatened with death but never die (or even age), whereas Beowulf not only ages but dies. He is intensely aware of fate and almost preoccupied with death. Transiency is his reality and this gives his story an additional dimension.

CLOSE READING: "Beowulf to Batman" by Roger B. Rollin

1. Write a correct bibliography entry for this article:

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2. Describe the audience for which this paper was written:

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3. Explain the author's purpose for writing this article:

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4. Summarize the thesis of this article in your own words:

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5. Define "pop romance" in your own words:

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6. Define "escapism" in your own words:

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7. Explain a "Type II" hero in your own words:

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8. In your own words, explain the relationship between the hero and the community's value system:

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9. In your own words, explain the relationship between the hero's antagonists and the community's value system:

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10. List the specific heroes Rollin uses as examples to prove his points:

a. _____	f. _____
b. _____	g. _____
c. _____	h. _____
d. _____	i. _____
e. _____	j. _____

11. Briefly explain the two formula plots referred to in this article:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

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2. \_\_\_\_\_

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12. Explain in your own words, the similarity between an epic and a pop hero:

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1. Write a correct bibliography entry for this article.
2. Describe the audience for which this paper was written.
3. Explain the author's purpose for writing this article.
4. Summarize the thesis of this article in your own words.
5. Define "pop romance" in your own words.
6. Define "escapism" in your own words.
7. Explain a "Type II" hero in your own words.
8. In your own words, explain the relationship between the hero and the community's value system.
9. In your own words, explain the relationship between the hero's antagonists and the community's value system.
10. List the specific heroes Rollin uses as examples to prove his points. (There are at least ten!)
11. Briefly explain the two formula plots referred to in this article.
12. Explain in your own words, the similarity between an epic hero and a pop hero.
13. Explain in your own words, the difference between an epic hero and a pop hero.
14. Write a 350-word précis of this article. Remember that a précis must be in your own words. No quotes at all! You should stick to the main points, not wander off explaining examples or giving your own opinion. Help yourself by going through the article and highlighting the major points.