



PRIVATE CONSCIENCE AND PUBLIC OBLIGATION: THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF HEROIC IDENTITY IN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract: *This article examines the relationship between heroic identity and social structure in selected canonical works of English and American literature, arguing that the most fundamental difference between the two traditions lies not in their heroic values but in their understanding of where heroic significance resides: in the social consequences of heroic action, or in the private quality of the hero's inner experience. Analysing Beowulf, Hamlet, Middlemarch, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and The Old Man and the Sea, the article demonstrates that English literary heroism is consistently oriented toward communal consequence and social obligation, while American literary heroism is consistently oriented toward private conscience and individual self-determination. The article further proposes that this structural difference is reinforced at the level of heroic discourse: the English hero's characteristic verbal plenitude and the American hero's characteristic verbal economy constitute rhetorical enactments of their respective social orientations. The article concludes by considering the implications of this difference for comparative literary scholarship and for contemporary understandings of the relationship between individual excellence and social responsibility.*

Keywords: *heroism; social obligation; private conscience; comparative literature; Hamlet; Hemingway; Eliot; heroic discourse; code hero; verbal economy*

1. Introduction: The Social Question in Heroic Literature

Every literary hero inhabits a social world — a community with its own values, hierarchies, obligations, and norms — and every literary heroic narrative turns, at

some level, on the relationship between the hero's individual excellence and that social world. What distinguishes different literary traditions from each other, in this respect, is less the nature of the heroic qualities celebrated than the understanding of how those qualities relate to the community: whether the hero's greatness is constituted by, expressed through, and evaluated in terms of its social consequences, or whether it resides essentially in the quality of individual inner experience, independent of and even in opposition to the social world.

This article argues that this question — the social question in heroic literature — constitutes the most fundamental structural difference between the English and American literary traditions in their construction of heroic identity. Drawing on comparative analysis of representative texts from both traditions, the article demonstrates that English literary heroism is consistently oriented toward communal consequence and social obligation, while American literary heroism is consistently oriented toward private conscience and individual self-determination. The article further proposes that this structural difference is reinforced, at a level that has not previously been systematically examined, by the distinctive rhetorical strategies of the heroes themselves: the English hero's characteristic verbal engagement with his social world and the American hero's characteristic reticence constitute rhetorical enactments of their respective social orientations.

The argument develops through four stages. The first examines the communal orientation of English literary heroism across three historical moments: the warrior society of Beowulf, the corrupted kingdom of Hamlet, and the provincial community of Middlemarch. The second examines the individualistic, privatised orientation of American literary heroism in Huckleberry Finn and The Old Man and the Sea. The third develops the argument about heroic discourse, examining how each tradition's social orientation is reproduced at the level of rhetorical strategy. The fourth considers the implications of the comparison for contemporary scholarship.

2. The English Tradition: Heroism as Social Obligation

The heroism of Beowulf is, in its deepest structure, a heroism of social function. Beowulf's greatness is not separable from his role as the protector of his people; it is not a private quality that happens to have social consequences, but a social quality through and through, constituted by the fulfilment of the obligations that the warrior code places on those of exceptional power. His voyage to Denmark is not an act of personal adventure but a response to the news that a community is suffering; his fight with Grendel unarmed is not personal bravado but a symbolic affirmation of the values that make social life possible — fair contest, individual excellence displayed openly, the defence of ordered community against the forces of chaos [12, p. 26]. Even the poem's most intimate moments — Beowulf's private resolve in the darkness of the night before the dragon-fight — are framed in terms of social obligation: he must fight because his people depend on him, and the quality of his courage is inseparable from the social function it serves.

The specifically relational dimension of this heroism is most visible in the figure of Wiglaf. As Tolkien demonstrated, Beowulf's heroic death acquires its full meaning only through Wiglaf's witnessing of it: the hero who dies without a witness dies without heroic significance in the world of the poem, because heroism in this tradition is fundamentally a relational achievement — something that requires recognition to be fully real [4, p. 285]. This requirement is not merely a social convention but a philosophical commitment: the heroic quality is not fully actualised until it is seen and valued by another member of the community who is capable of understanding what it means. Heroism, in Beowulf, is not a private state but a public relationship.

Shakespeare's Hamlet shifts the terrain of heroic action from the mead-hall to the court and from physical courage to intellectual and moral integrity, but the social orientation of the heroic ideal remains constant. Hamlet's heroism is defined by what it means for the corrupted kingdom of Denmark: his responsibility to restore justice to a social world in which the instruments of justice have been contaminated is the

primary framework within which his individual qualities are expressed and evaluated. Bradley identified Hamlet's essential quality as a combination of exceptional intellectual sensitivity and exceptional moral feeling [10, p. 91], and both of these qualities are constitutively social: they are the qualities of a consciousness that perceives the full weight of its social obligations and is incapacitated precisely by the seriousness with which it takes them. His paralysis is not weakness but the mark of a heroic consciousness that cannot act on the social world without a moral certainty that the world refuses to provide.

Hamlet's heroism ultimately receives its social validation in Horatio's solemn promise to tell his story to the world. This promise — "And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story" — is not a sentimental closing gesture but a structural necessity: Hamlet's heroic significance is constituted partly by its transmission to the community that has not yet fully understood what he stood for. The English tradition's insistence on social consequence as a dimension of heroic meaning is nowhere more clearly expressed than in this moment, when the hero's death is given significance by the community's recognition and memorialisation of it.

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* relocates the heroism of social obligation to the most intimate and ordinary level of daily life, but does not abandon it. Dorothea Brooke's "unhistoric acts" are heroic precisely because of their social consequences: they contribute, invisibly but really, to the growth of goodness in the world around her [11, p. 822]. Eliot's famous concluding sentence — that the growing good of the world depends on unhistoric acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life — insists that individual moral effort has collective consequences even when those consequences are not visible to the individuals who produce them. The social orientation of English heroism is here taken to its most democratic and most

demanding extreme: every person who lives with integrity contributes to the social good, and the heroism of that contribution is no less real for being unrecognised.

3. The American Tradition: Heroism as Private Conscience

The American literary tradition's understanding of heroic significance represents a fundamental inversion of the English model. Where the English tradition consistently orients heroism toward communal consequence and social obligation, the American tradition consistently locates the moral centre of heroic experience in the individual's relationship to his own conscience rather than in any social obligation. The decisive locus of heroic meaning is not the community's recognition of the hero's achievement but the hero's own inner experience of moral integrity — an experience that may be entirely invisible to, and actively misrecognised by, the social world around him.

This inversion is most dramatically displayed in Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The novel's moral climax — Huck's decision to help Jim escape rather than return him to slavery — is, from the perspective of the social world Huck inhabits, an act of moral failure. Huck understands it as such: he believes he is doing wrong, surrendering to his worst instincts, and condemning his soul to damnation. The irony — that what Huck regards as his moral failure is, from the reader's perspective, his moral triumph — is the novel's central insight and most distinctive literary achievement [7, p. 269]. The hero's moral greatness is precisely inaccessible to him as such; it can only be perceived by the reader who is positioned outside the moral framework that Huck has internalised. More significantly still, it produces no social consequence: Jim's situation is resolved by other means entirely, and Huck's great moral choice changes nothing in the social world. Its significance resides entirely in the quality of the inner life from which it springs — the authenticity of Huck's feeling for Jim, the integrity of his response to direct human experience as against the claims of social convention. Fiedler identified this privatisation of heroic meaning as a defining feature of the American literary imagination [22, p. 26]: the

hero who achieves genuine moral insight but lacks or refuses the social resources to translate that insight into social change.

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* presents the purest and most philosophically concentrated expression of the American privatisation of heroic significance. Santiago's three-day struggle with the giant marlin is a genuine heroic ordeal — requiring courage, mastery, and endurance of the highest order — but its significance is entirely interior. He returns to port with the stripped skeleton of his fish, which the tourists misidentify as a shark's skeleton. Nobody in Santiago's social world understands what he has achieved. The boy Manolin perceives something — the quality of the old man's greatness — but not because he witnessed the struggle; because he loves the man and is capable of recognising genuine excellence. For the community at large, the ordeal is invisible, and its heroic significance is accessible only to the reader who has witnessed it from within. Young's analysis of the Hemingway code identified this as a constitutive feature of Hemingway's heroic vision: the quality of the effort is what matters, and the quality of the effort is precisely what cannot be seen from outside [25, p. 62]. Bloom noted that this inwardness — the location of authentic significance in the hero's interior life rather than in public recognition or social consequence — represents American literature's most original contribution to the Western heroic tradition [15, p. 52].

The contrast with the English tradition could not be sharper. Beowulf's death is the occasion for public lamentation and the explicit celebration of his life's achievement by the Geats. Hamlet's death is accompanied by Horatio's solemn promise to tell his story to the world. Dorothea's "unhistoric acts" are understood by Eliot as contributing to a collective moral heritage. In each case, the English tradition insists that the hero's achievement matters partly because of its effects on the community, and that the community's recognition and memorialisation of it is part of what gives it meaning. The American tradition insists, with equal consistency,

that the hero's achievement is its own justification and that its significance does not depend on any social validation.

4. Heroic Discourse: How Heroes Speak as They Live

The structural difference between communal English heroism and privatised American heroism is reinforced, at a level that the comparative scholarship has not previously systematically examined, by the distinctive rhetorical strategies of the heroes themselves. The hero speaks as he lives: the social orientation of heroic identity is reproduced in the very form of the hero's language, and the comparison between the two traditions' characteristic modes of heroic discourse reveals a structural homology between rhetorical practice and social philosophy that deepens the comparative analysis significantly.

The hero of the English literary tradition is characteristically a figure of verbal plenitude. Hamlet's extraordinary soliloquies — sustained, complex, philosophically searching explorations of his own experience and its moral implications — are not merely dramatic devices but constitutive acts of heroic self-construction in language. It is in and through his speech that Hamlet defines himself as a heroic consciousness, different in kind from the morally simpler figures who surround him. This verbal richness is not incidental to his heroism but expressive of it: the hero who speaks at length, who engages publicly with the full complexity of his obligations, is the hero who is oriented toward the community as the arena of heroic significance. To speak is to make oneself available to the social world; Hamlet's extraordinary verbal engagement with his situation is a form of communal testimony, a sharing of heroic perception with the audience that witnesses it.

The theoretical dimension of this observation can be grounded in Bakhtin's dialogic conception of language, which argues that every utterance is simultaneously an act of self-definition and a social gesture: in choosing how to speak, a speaker constitutes a particular self and a particular relationship to the social world [31, p. 93]. Applied to the literary hero, this principle suggests that the hero's characteristic

mode of speech is a constitutive dimension of heroic identity. Hamlet's verbal plenitude constitutes him as a heroic subject oriented toward social engagement; Hemingway's Santiago's characteristic verbal economy constitutes him as a heroic subject oriented toward private self-sufficiency.

Hemingway described his prose method as the principle of the iceberg: the suppression of seven-eighths of what is known and felt below the surface of the text, with only the visible eighth in the prose itself [32, p. 192]. The code hero does not speak about his inner life; the depth of his experience is precisely what his laconic speech simultaneously conceals and reveals. Santiago's utterances throughout the novella are spare and practical — observations about the sea, the fish, the stars — but the reader's sense of the richness of his interior life derives from the contrast between that brevity and the vast, barely articulated experience behind it. Verbal economy is thus not merely a stylistic preference but an ethical stance: to elaborate, explain, or justify would be to expose a need for social validation that genuine heroic dignity, in this tradition, does not require. The hero's reticence is a form of self-sufficiency, and his self-sufficiency is the rhetorical enactment of the American tradition's deepest conviction: that genuine heroic significance resides within, not without.

Jakobson's distinction between the referential and emotive functions of language illuminates the mechanism by which this reticence operates [33, p. 355]. In the discourse of the American code hero, what is not said carries the primary weight of meaning: the emotive dimension of heroic experience is communicated not through explicit self-expression but through the very act of self-suppression. The reader's understanding of Santiago's inner life — his grief for the marlin, his sense of kinship with it, his quiet pride in the quality of his struggle — is produced precisely by the gap between the enormity of his experience and the radical economy of its verbal articulation. This gap is itself a significant rhetorical construction: heroic reticence is no less artfully produced than Hamlet's verbal plenitude, but it

achieves its effects through strategic withholding rather than strategic deployment of language. The hero's silence speaks as eloquently as the hero's words — but it speaks of a different relationship to the social world, and of a different understanding of where heroic significance resides.

5. Conclusion: Two Models of Heroic Significance

The comparative analysis conducted in this article has demonstrated that the most fundamental structural difference between English and American literary heroism lies not in their values — courage, integrity, and sacrifice are celebrated in both — but in their understanding of where heroic significance resides and what social relationship constitutes it. English literary heroism is consistently communal: the hero's greatness is defined by its social function, expressed through its social consequences, and given its full meaning by the community's recognition and memorialisation of it. American literary heroism is consistently private: its significance resides in the quality of the hero's inner experience, is accessible primarily to the hero himself and to the perceptive reader, and does not depend on social validation or communal recognition.

This structural difference, the article has further argued, is reinforced at the level of rhetorical strategy: the English hero's verbal plenitude and the American hero's verbal economy are not merely stylistic features but enactments of their respective social orientations. The hero speaks as he lives; the form of heroic discourse is part of the content of heroic identity. This rhetorical dimension of the comparison deepens the structural analysis and suggests that the divergence between the two traditions is more thoroughgoing than a focus on character, action, and cultural context alone can reveal.

The implications of this comparison for contemporary scholarship are significant. The two traditions represent genuinely different but not mutually exclusive responses to the perennial question that heroic narrative addresses: what is the relationship between individual excellence and social obligation? The English

tradition's insistence on social consequence as a dimension of heroic meaning provides a productive counterpoint to the American tradition's insistence on private conscience as the ultimate moral authority. Each tradition illuminates a genuine dimension of the problem that the other underemphasises; their comparative study deepens our understanding of both. In a cultural moment in which questions of individual freedom and social responsibility are again urgently contested, the dialogue between these two heroic traditions has a significance that extends beyond the literary-historical and into the broadly human.

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