Why I Like Teaching KS3 Students about Robin Hood, King Arthur, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Beowulf and the Heroes of Classical Myth

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... one day he'll come along - the man I love ...

Yes, well! I’m possibly not the only aging spinster still waiting for her knight on a white charger. Like the secretary, the librarian or the nurse in an old-school Mills and Boon-style romance, like Rapunzel in her tower or Cinderella at her hearth, we await his coming. ‘Clipperty-clop,’ go Mr Rochester’s horse’s hooves as he gallops towards his frozen Jane Eyre;1 ‘Swoosh!’ as Perseus swoops to save Andromeda chained to the rock. And Patient Griselda sits like a monument, smiling at grief.2

Yes! He will come and we shall all go to the ball and live happily ever after. Sorry, boys, I don’t quite know what the male equivalent is. Possibly that for every Jack there is, somewhere, somehow, some way, his Jill who will gaze adoringly up at him, reflecting his image back at twice the natural size3 .... and he will have found what he has been searching for: the hero inside himself! You’ve gotta love it!

Of course, a sounder interpretation of these beguiling fairy tales goes along these lines: we are all, men and women, both Cinderella and the Prince, both Andromeda and Perseus; we can and must be the agents of our own liberation. What we must search for is the reunion of these sadly polarised psychological elements. Once that is accomplished, we’ll really have a ball.

In the meantime we’re still searching for the hero inside ourselves. And
the good news is that now we can all be heroes; in fact we are exhorted to
strive for our place in the sun, our fifteen minutes of fame, because we're
worth it. We can all be on the telly, hanging out our soiled linen, mouthing
off and selling our crummy secrets. We can set up our webcams for
voyeurs to slaver over, or blog or tweet like preening bird-brains. We can
and, by Jove, an inordinate number of us do!

When I show my A level students Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*,
showing the sad futility of a life devoted to achieving that moment in the
sunshine of success, it’s not immediately clear to the young consumerist
where Willy Loman has gone wrong: he worked hard for his house, his
fridge, his car. Now it’s time to retire, to sit down and survey the fruits of
labour. Ah! now we see the problem: the car has crashed, the fridge is
obsolete, the house has been hemmed in by ugly developments. Finally,
and far too late, we turn to the earth - perhaps that should be the Earth.
We try too late to set the seed for some more worthy, more lasting
harvest. Too late! We are worth more dead than alive; and, as the voice of
reason whispers in our ear, ‘No one’s worth anything dead!’ So what’s a
man’s life worth? Answers on a postcard, please.

You sit down to read the newspaper and what strikes home is not the ugly
bully who has wrecked someone else’s dreams, but the dodderly old bloke
or the quiet young dad or the feisty mum-of-four or the school-kid or the
foreign tourist … the deus ex machina who stepped into the drama and
did something wonderful, because something wonderful was needed.

What I want to know is - who are these people—these ‘aid workers’ and
‘doctors sans frontier’ and Save the Children and Christian Aid and Red
Cross operatives who go places no one should have to go and see what no
one should have to see, and will not give up - gracefully or otherwise - in
the face of those overwhelming odds we could have told them about, if
they’d bothered to ask the likes of us; which they never do.

Are these heroes? From where I’m sitting, quietly at home with my cat
and my cocoa, they look as if they might be; how would we know?

There are other aspects of the hero, of course. Heroes are the stuff of
legend: we tell their stories; they guide our aspirations; they invade our
dreams; they shape our moral conscience. To know a society, ask who its
heroes are. Oh Lordy! Must we answer: the latest X Factor or BGT or
Strictly contender? I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here! Big Brother
psycho porn star transvestite? Beam me up, Scotty! Even our sporting
heroes are becoming more ‘celeb’ than square-jawed adventurer; more
Posh ’n’ Becks, Coleen ’n’ Wayne than Spock ’n’ Kirk.
My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!

At least for Ozymandias some small vestige of glory remained:

Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

What will persist of our society’s paparazzi fodder? Not a jot or tittle, I’ll warrant! With a sigh of relief we turn to Robin Hood, to Camelot, even (who’d have thought it!) to Beowulf. Not to mention Odysseus and chums of Troy fame, and Clash of the Titans 2010. And I haven’t even mentioned Superman and Batman and Spiderman, who in their revised and updated forms are all heroes in the time-honoured mould.

Last week I was reading Tennyson’s Ulysses with my year elevens. (‘Which one’s he?’ ‘Sean Bean.’ ‘Oh! Brad Pitt was better!’). Ulysses may be eligible for his freedom pass and the winter fuel allowance but he’s by no means ready to settle down to rule Ithaca; he wants one last, great adventure; and, with any luck, he’ll be sailing to the Happy Isles and never have to come back to his pipe and slippers and Her Indoors. His son Telemachus is an unimaginative, plodding sort of guy; he can do the biz back at home while Dad and his old mates sail off into the sunset. It’s like Just William has done a Freaky Friday manoeuvre on his father. Heroes seek out adventure; they are restless; danger is meat-and-drink to them. Not for them the nine-to-five, the stake-holder pension, the ISA, the mortgage.

But then there’s Arthur! Arthur is a hero of a different colour: he stuck it out, learning to govern, to be a leader of men, to be a champion of his people. And when he was gone, how his people mourned and longed for his return. O for leaders with Arthur’s nobility, who surround themselves with knights of stainless honour. Look at the lick-spittle self-servers around today - ah me! The flower of Camelot hazarded all in search of spiritual riches; the holy grail for modern politicians is Personal Aggrandisement. Very sad!

A hero knows what’s Right. If in doubt, he has a trusty Merlin to point him in the right direction, or the touchstone of his honour, nurtured in chivalry, to guide his steps. Sir Gawain withstands the Green Knight’s axe because his heart is pure; there is just that tiny nick in his neck, because he accepted the Lady’s girdle of invulnerability; and who wouldn’t, in his position!
Heroes, after all, are not gods. They may be closely related to gods, on one side of the family at least, but human they are, with our human failings. Whilst godhead is far beyond our ken, we can aspire to know heroism, in its richness and variety. Sometimes heroism is about standing back from corruption and heckling from the sidelines. The barb of wit can sting as sharply as the arrow, and to smile and snap the fingers in the tyrant’s face may be heroic in its way: the raspberry of ridicule versus the sword of tyranny. Bold Robin Hood’s resistance to oppression lies in the notion of Merry England and the good-fellowship of the Greenwood. The carousing of Friar Tuck and the ballads of Alan-a-Dale are as significant as the strong right arm of Little John in holding out against Bad King John and his henchmen. Sherwood Forest is a pastoral refuge of right-thinking and right-living from a court and country laid waste by avarice and base ambition. We know instinctively that the Sheriff of Nottingham never cracks a smile or enjoys a few bevies and a bit of karaoke with his acolytes. If Arthur is our responsible leader, wrestling with his conscience and striving to preserve the realm, Robin is our Merry Monarch-Manqué, fighting oppression with a jest and a well-placed arrow. Which of them would best serve our present times, I wonder.

Perhaps our present dark times call for a new St. George to slay the Dragon of Ignorance and Spiritual Impoverishment. Or a Beowulf to rid us of the Monster and the Monster’s Mum. Personally I’m waiting for the Monster’s Nan to show up; then there’ll be trouble!

Of course, heroes are not really about ridding us of our Grendels; heroes do what they do because, well, because that’s what being a hero is about. A world without threat, without conflict, without misery and suffering would hardly be a ‘world fit for heroes’; that was Ulysses’ problem on Ithaca in Tennyson’s poem. On the plus side, the world at present shows no sign of perfecting itself to the pitch of making heroes like them redundant.

Notes
2. Twelfth Night, by William Shakespeare
3. Reflecting Men At Twice Their Natural Size, by Sally Cline and Dale Spender.
4. Ozymandias, by P. B. Shelley.
5. Ulysses, by Alfred Lord Tennyson.
7. Freaky Friday, by Mary Rodgers.