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Question #2
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Enemies of Cultures

If there is one thing that is the same in every story ever told, it's that every story ever told revolves around some sort of conflict. Be the conflict internal or external or a combination of both, conflict is what makes a story relatable; people are able to connect to a clash between opposing forces because there is always some sort of clash in life. What is different between most stories' conflicts, however, is the enemy with which there is a battle. The different enemies that are fought in stories not only make the stories different than others, and therefore more interesting, but they also reveal what the culture about which it is written fears. Stories' enemies can always be linked back to something or many things that a culture fears, and this is always a way to really understand the audience for whom the story was written. The stories of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were written in differing time periods with differing cultural values; the enemies which are fought in both stories vary in many ways, and the differences in the enemies are what reveal the differences in the cultures for which they were composed.

In both *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the stages for the enemies' entrances are set at parties. In Heorot, the mead hall that King Hrothgar built to celebrate his splendor, the parties for which it was built are constant, as his men use it for merriment and celebration nightly. One night, an annoyed and angry Grendel bursts in to one of the gatherings unannounced. His unwanted presence causes massive panic and destruction; he ends up murdering and devouring many of Hrothgar's soldiers and slinking back off into the night, and continues to do so many times. Just the scene of Grendel's entrance discloses many insights as to what the people for which *Beowulf* was written feared most. The time in which Grendel attacks is as relevant as any detail. Grendel only attacks at night. In a time period where electricity was a thing of the far distant future,

the dark was terrifying for the original audience of *Beowulf*. The dark, by definition, is the absence of light, the absence of safety and security. The fear of the dark reveals a deeper fear—the fear of the unknown. As is common with most cultures, the chief enemy fought in *Beowulf* reveals further reinforces that theme of the instinctual human fear of the unknown. Grendel, along with showing up during the night, is quoted as having ‘dwelt...among the banished monsters, Cain’s clan, whom the Creator had outlawed and condemned as outcasts’ (lines 104-107). In a story from a time when one’s name and one’s family defined whom one was, it is understandable that the enemy of *Beowulf* would not belong to a family but would have dwelt among evil. Grendel did not belong to any sort of group; he was an unknown, uninvited entity attacking the place the people thought to be safe.

Likewise, the principal enemy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* enters, uninvited, a place the people thought to be safe. Conversely, however, the people of King Arthur’s court are not nearly as hostile towards the surprise guest, the Green Knight, as were the people of King Hrothgar in *Beowulf* towards Grendel. What is revealed in this scene of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is one of the things the people of this time held most dear—their lives. The Green Knight challenges the men of King Arthur’s round table to his game—chop his head off, and a year later he would chop one of their heads off. The lack of knights rising to the challenge reveals they value their lives over their honor, dignity, courage, everything a knight is supposed to hold before himself. ‘Where is the fortitude and fearlessness you’re so famous for?’ the Green Knight scoffs at King Arthur’s men when they do not immediately accept his challenge (lines 310-311). Their lack of action, and by extension their cowardice, shows what they truly valued—life—a reasonable and rational thing to value, but valuing life and fearing loss of life over knightly values would have been shameful for the Knights of the Round Table.

Along with fears of unknown and loss of life, the enemies of the stories reveal there were, and still are, genuine fears of entities which are different from normal appearances. Both Grendel and

the Green Knight deviate from the normal human appearance. Being massive in size, both Grendel and the Green Knight's appearances assist with perceiving them as threats. Grendel is 'a fiend out of hell' and is characterized as being utterly grotesque, but no actual physical description is given, except the image of his giant head being carried back to Heorot, which adds to the terror of the unknown entity (line 100). His lack of physical description adds an air of mystery to Grendel—the audience would have been just as scared of a monster not chiefly characterized by appearance being that they were terrified of the unknown. Conversely, the Green Knight is given a lavish portrayal with much attention given to describing his physicality and clothing. Both enemies are subhuman in regards to the fact that they have human characteristics, but cannot be classified as human. Their giant statures and inability to be killed reveal that both audiences would have feared threats that they could not defeat. People often judge others based on appearance, and the terrifying appearances of Grendel and the Green Knight helps contemporary audiences begin to understand what the cultures of the past feared.

Both of the principle external enemies in *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reveal fears that are innately human. The fear of the unknown, the fear of loss of life, the fear of a subhuman entity; all are common fears and themes through human history. However, the internal enemies that both Beowulf and Sir Gawain face are what expose the character issues the people of their cultures wished to eradicate and feared. Internal battles are always the hardest to fight; when the enemy is within oneself, the enemy isn't as easily fought. Through the story of *Beowulf*, Beowulf is fighting himself, and more importantly, his pride. Although Beowulf's boasting is characteristic of warriors of the period, he is excessive in his bragging, even among his culture's standards. He had tasted success early in his youth, and like many before and after him, his ego inflated from such success and consequently his pride. Beowulf's pride ultimately leads to his downfall when, in his old age, he fights the dragon threatening his kingdom alone. The very

character flaw that had plagued him since his youth ultimately resulted in his death. The intended original audience of Beowulf would have understood the fatal character flaw of pride and the destruction it can cause. When Beowulf succumbed to his inner enemy of pride, he was destroyed.

Although Beowulf lost his battle with his inner enemy, Sir Gawain dealt with his inner enemy, temptation, a little more successfully. The chivalrous knight's code demanded much of the men who upheld it, including upholding the virtue of chastity. Being chaste was of importance to knights because it was supposed to bring a knight closer to God and consequently be indomitable. After Sir Gawain's long journey to the castle of Bertilak de Hautdesert, his exhaustion had reached a climax, so before he went to finish the deadly game he had started a year before with the Green Knight, a relaxing couple days in bed was much needed. However, Gawain's relaxing couple days turned into a couple days of being constantly on guard and resisting temptation. Bertilak's wife, being characterized as 'the fairest among [other women]...more glorious than Guinevere,' took a liking to Gawain, and Bertilak had told Gawain that whatever he wanted in the castle was his. (lines 943-945). Having a woman at his disposal would have been tempting enough, not to mention she would enter his bedchamber and entice him to have sexual relations with her. In the conclusion of the story the reader discovers that Bertilak's wife enticing Sir Gawain was all a part of the game; Bertilak was purposefully trying to make Sir Gawain forsake his knightly vows. The fact that Gawain had to struggle with the internal enemy of temptation divulges the fact that his culture greatly feared temptation; giving into temptation would distance one from God. Thankfully, Gawain was able to resist the wife's sexual advances and prove true to his vows of chastity, however, he did succumb to temptation with the sin of pride.

As a knight, one was not to fear death in any circumstance. When Gawain accepts the green scarf the wife offers him to protect him from death, he brings dishonor on himself; he succumbs to temptation in an attempt to preserve his life. Dishonorably preserving life was worse than an

honorable death to the Knights of the Round Table. Gawain's enemy is pride is rooted in favoring his own life over bringing honor to his king. To contemporary audiences, preservation of life seems like an understandable thing about which to have pride, but Gawain's knightly oath swore him to be honorable to his commitments, such as the deadly game being played with the Green Knight, before honoring himself. Although he was marginally more successful at battling his inner enemy of temptation than Beowulf was at battling his inner enemy of pride, Gawain did succumb to pride, and the common theme of succumbing to sinful pride unites the two works.

The cultural contexts, however, are what make the enemies of pride different. In Beowulf's culture, pride was acceptable, encouraged even, if the one boasting could back his claims. Beowulf's enemy came from too much pride, however, and this eventually caused his demise. In a time when interdependence in a community was standard, the intended audience of *Beowulf* would have understood Beowulf's pride to be dangerous; there is safety in having others alongside to help with dangerous tasks such as slaying a dragon. Although pride in Beowulf's culture was acceptable, any kind of pride was deemed sinful and dangerous in Sir Gawain's highly Catholic culture. Christians, especially knights, were supposed to reflect Christ, be the quintessence of humility, showing respect to everyone. The inner enemy of pride was one that the original intended audience of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would have understood to be a sinful one; God commanded one to be humble and a prideful person was subject to the wrath of God. The differences in pride as an enemy further demonstrate how enemies and conflicts within stories reflect the culture for which they were composed.

Cultural values may change over time, but one thing remains constant—enemies in a culture's stories reflect what it views as threatening and hazardous. Be the enemy a tangible enemy, such as Grendel or the Green Knight, or an internal enemy, such as temptation or pride, the fears of a culture are manifested and can be realized in that enemy. As contemporary readers of these

stories, it is possible to look back to these and compare the different cultures and see how humanity has progressed with its fears and concerns, what has changed and what has evolved and what has essentially stayed the same, and this is why the differences in enemies from the stories of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is so vital.