

“The Stuff of Legend:
Redefining What it Means to be a Hero”

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Heroes have existed for as long as people have been telling stories. They often act as the centerpiece around which the other parts of the story are built. A large number of stories are generated through the recounting of the remarkable actions of a particular person. However, these stories often become more focused on said actions rather than on the person performing them. This results in very little or no consideration given to the thoughts and motivations behind the character performing the actions. A manifestation of this can be found in the practice of titling a story after the name of the protagonist. We see much of this in contemporary literature amongst the likes of *Harry Potter*, *Percy Jackson*, or other young adult novels, but it also a practice that can be found in earlier stories like *Macbeth*, *Don Quixote*, or *Faust*. This practice can have a misleading effect on the reader's understanding of the protagonist. Titling the novel after the protagonist's name can lead to the assumption that the titular character is the hero of the story. This, coupled with the focus on the protagonist's actions rather than their motivations causes the reader to assume that the protagonist is an infallible force for good without a malicious bone in their body. It fosters a mindset of viewing good and evil as black and white, the protagonist against the antagonist, where the protagonist is the flawless hero while the antagonist is the cruel villain. This, however, creates a problem. If a story seldom investigates the protagonist's thoughts and motivations, then the reader has no evidence that the protagonist is actually a hero. This results in a confused reader who sees contradicting or differing notions of a hero because they automatically associate a protagonist with being a hero, and therefore the reader misunderstands what a hero is. They associate the protagonist with heroism without really knowing what heroism truly is. The essential question they must then ask themselves is,

“What is a hero, and how can we reconcile differing notions of a hero as they appear in different kinds of stories?”

In this essay I will attempt to find an answer to these questions by first examining a conventional hero who is more in keeping with the Oxford English Dictionary definition of a hero. I have selected the OED as the standard, foundational definition for a hero for the sake of doing away with any conflicting colloquial connotations that may be associated with the word “hero.” I will then test these definitions against a conventional hero to see if they exhibit the traits outlined in the following definitions, as well as to see if they have anything else to offer to the definitions of a hero. In this first case I will be testing them against the character of Beowulf in the great poem *Beowulf*. I will show that the definitions offered by the OED are unsatisfactory, and using Beowulf I will reshape and reform a newer and more suitable definition of a hero that focuses on action coupled with motivation. Using the new definitions established through the examination of Beowulf, I will show that Pierre Bezúkhov of *War and Peace* not only meets this definition, but also exceeds it by demonstrating a purity of heart which proves the motivations for his altruistic actions come from a place of pure selflessness and love. I have chosen Pierre Bezúkhov for examination because I believe that not only does Pierre possess all of the attributes of a hero thereby making him one, but he also possesses characteristics which, when placed among the ranks of other heroes from other literary works, make him stand out as a shining example of humanity in the face of atrocity. In other words, I will raise the standard of what it means to be a hero using Beowulf and Pierre, and then focusing on Pierre I will show why he should be considered one of the greatest heroes in literature.

The OED has several definitions for a hero, but we will be looking at a combination of three in order to form the standard for what makes a hero. First, that of the classical Greek hero type, which the OED defines as “a man (or occasionally a woman) of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods; *esp.* one regarded as semi-divine and immortal.” The second is similar, but it highlights the violent, militaristic aspects of a potential hero: “a man (or occasionally a woman) distinguished by the performance of courageous or noble actions, *esp.* in battle; a brave or illustrious warrior, soldier, etc.” The third and last OED definition which is pertinent to our investigation is that of a literary hero: “the central character or protagonist (often, but *esp.* in later use not necessarily, male) in a story, play, film, etc.; *esp.* one whom the reader or audience is intended to support or admire.” By determining that Beowulf does not fit these, I will show that the attributes in the OED’s definitions do not say anything about the thoughts, motivations, desires or personality of what a hero should be. Further, I will argue that Pierre’s heroism is not found in warfare, admiration, or supernatural abilities, but is instead found in his soul, as it should be for any hero. In other words, I will show that Pierre’s success in his striving to better himself, his powerful desire to help others, and his belief in the innate goodness of the human spirit are just some traits that merit the distinction of Pierre as a hero.

The first step in setting this standard is to distinguish between a protagonist and a hero. A protagonist is considered to be the main character in a story, whether it be a novel, a play or even a poem like the *Iliad*. The ambiguous nature of a protagonist is key for its definition because, as is often found, the character traits of a protagonist are often very different from story to story. For example, Beowulf is the protagonist in *Beowulf*, and Don Quixote is the protagonist in *Don Quixote*, but anyone would be hard pressed to find more than a handful of similarities

between the two characters, if even that many. It follows then that in order for them both to fit under the definition of a protagonist the definition must not include any specific notions about the character traits of a protagonist. The protagonist must simply stand as one of the main characters in a story, and they are defined by plot rather than by any character traits.

The protagonist does not have to be the sole main character because if that were the case then stories like the *Iliad* or *War and Peace* would not have a clear protagonist, instead these stories feature multiple protagonists like Hector and Paris, or Pierre Bezúkhov and Andrew Bolkónski. However, the classification of a character as a protagonist can change depending on either the perspective of the reader or the perspective of another character. For example, in the *Iliad*, if Hector is considered a protagonist then Achilles would be an antagonist, so this simply means the character which opposes or stands as an adversary against the protagonist. However, Achilles can also be quite accurately considered a protagonist, in which case the antagonist would be Hector or possibly Agamemnon. This fluctuation around which character is the protagonist or antagonist is due to the broad definition of a protagonist. However, most stories typically make clear who the protagonist is at the outset of the story.

It is extremely important to understand that when stories feature a clear cut protagonist established at the outset of the narrative, this protagonist is not automatically the hero. To associate the protagonist with being the hero is to impose a preconceived set of ideal characteristics on that character before having learning anything about them. This can lead to confusion and misinterpretation of the story when the supposed hero does something unheroic. For example, if a protagonist spends the majority of a story saying he is going to help people once he overcomes the antagonist, but when having defeated said adversary he goes about

helping only himself or those he is close with, then readers are left not only with a great deal of frustration and disappointment, but they are stuck with no discernable hero and no resolution. Granted some stories may not have heroes and are meant to leave the reader frustrated, disappointed, and without closure, but any story that does feature a hero requires that the reader understand what a hero really is. This creates the need to establish a clear, yet broad definition of a hero so that the reader is not left flipping back and forth between pages trying to figure out why the character he thought was a hero is behaving like a villain.

In order to test the OED's definitions we must look to a classic example of a character typically considered to be a hero, such as is found with Beowulf in *Beowulf*. Starting with *Beowulf* allows for the older classical idea of a hero to be established as the standard by which a character is measured in order to determine if that character is a hero. Using the character traits of Beowulf as a means of forming the standard of a hero I want to see if this standard can be applied to Pierre Bezúkhov of *War and Peace*, and if it cannot, then to show that the standard should be adapted to include characters like Pierre even though they feature character traits different from that of conventional heroes like Beowulf.

To begin the extrapolation of what it means to be a hero we must look to key instances where Beowulf's body, mind, and personality are described, as well as any instances in which he is referred to as being a hero or demonstrating qualities which other characters deem heroic. From there we will extract the recurring qualities that are mentioned by the narrator, as well as the other characters, that are in reference to Beowulf and the actions he has performed. However, it will also be necessary to consider moments in which Beowulf or his actions are not directly referred to as heroic because these will be the instances from which the other characters

of the story form their conceptions about Beowulf's heroism. Therefore not every example will feature a form of the word "hero," but rather will demonstrate a quality Beowulf possesses that is integral in determining how and why people refer to him as a hero. I will also be pointing out instances where Beowulf exhibits the traits included in the OED's definitions.

One example of Beowulf's heroic qualities occurs the first time any description at all is given of him. It is important to note that because this is the first instance where Beowulf is described, the kind of attributes that are ascribed to him are meant to form the reader's first impression of Beowulf, and therefore stand as a foundation of how the readers are supposed to understand the character. Before he even sets sail to help the Danes with Grendel, Beowulf is described as being so exceptionally unique that there "was no one else like him alive. In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth, high-born and powerful" (Heaney 15). Later in the same passage he is described as moving "about like the leader he was" (Heaney 15). These descriptors paint a picture of a man who was born with the ability to do great things. His nobility and leadership skills are innate in him, and he therefore may not have necessarily earned these skills through trials and tribulations. None of the descriptors used in this passage are inherently physical, although "mightiest" and "powerful" are meant to show that Beowulf is a physically imposing man who possesses extreme strength. The implication that the qualities described here are innate is a step towards exclusivity when forming the standard of a "hero." The language of "high-born" and "mightiest man alive" (Heaney 15) implies that these qualities are such that one can only be born with them, and that they cannot be acquired by other means. By naming Beowulf the "mightiest man alive" the author is implying that the attributes Beowulf possesses are not such that one can acquire them through practice, training, or other such methods, but

rather that Beowulf is more like a man who has been blessed with abilities bestowed on him by a divine force. In this manner Beowulf fits neatly into the first OED definition and is reminiscent of the second. However, it would do us ill to use these kinds of physical, possibly divinely acquired attributes in our definition of a hero because they denote nothing about personality traits of the character, and therefore tell us nothing about how the character would use that strength. Therefore it is essential for us to exclude the aspect of supernatural or divine abilities in the OED definitions in forming our new, reshaped definition. If we did not have the rest of the story to show that he does, in fact, use his strength and might for the good of others, we would never know why he is considered to be so mighty.

From this analysis of Beowulf's first description, we can see that while physical strength and power may facilitate the action of fighting monsters and saving village people, it certainly does not always follow that the possessor of such strength would use it for such selfless purposes. However, we can say that in order for a character to be deemed a hero, they must demonstrate something beyond physical attributes. The key to determining whether or not a character is a hero lies not in their physical description, but instead lies in determining one of two things. First, if in the case like Beowulf where the character possesses great physical power, how does that character use their strength, and do they use it for the benefit of others. Second, if the character does not possess supernatural physical power, how do they use other skills and attributes they may possess for the sake of benefiting others. Further, from analysis of this we have the first quality that any hero must possess regardless of physical form: the desire and capability to help others.

Immense strength is certainly a helpful quality to possess if one is to be considered a hero, but even more important still is the desire to use that power for the sake of the good of others. However, a quality that is crucial to possess, especially if a character has superhuman strength like Beowulf, is the knowledge and wisdom of how best to use that strength for the sake of others. If a man of great strength wishes to help people, but does not take into consideration what exactly needs to be done to help them, and how best to achieve that goal, then he will not be successful in that endeavor. For example, if Superman wants to defeat a giant monster terrorizing Metropolis, but in the process of battling the monster Superman destroys half the city, then he did not really perform a heroic deed because his actions caused the death of innocents. If, however, Superman were to lure the monster away then he would cause considerably less collateral damage, if any at all, thereby exhibiting a selfless care and forethought for the well-being of innocents.

While Beowulf is Geatish rather than Kryptonian, he exhibits similar forethought and care when combating Grendel. Rather than waiting for Grendel to wreak havoc and kill more of Hrothgar's men, Beowulf goes to Grendel's lair to face the monster on its home turf. When Beowulf returns from his quest with the head of Grendel, Hrothgar praises Beowulf's abilities, remarking that "in all things you are even tempered, prudent, and resolute" (Heaney 117). Hrothgar is commending Beowulf's execution of his goal, particularly because it did not cost any more human lives. He is exalting the fact that Beowulf was constantly considering the safety of others when preparing to achieve his goal of slaying Grendel. This forward thinking is apparent right before Beowulf dives into the lake to reach Grendel's lair. The only thing Beowulf is concerned with prior to facing Grendel is the safety and security of his comrades. He asks

Hrothgar that in the event of his death to “take care of my young company, my comrades in arms” (Heaney 103). Such forethought demonstrates Beowulf’s selflessness, and is also an indicator of humility and wisdom. Rather than believing he is invincible (which, considering what he is capable of, would not be unreasonable), he recognizes that he is mortal and that his men would be leaderless and vulnerable if he died. He demonstrates wisdom in recognizing his own mortality while simultaneously proving that he considers all the possible consequences of his actions, specifically his death. This denotes a man who is careful and thoughtful of any effects his actions may have on others. In other words, he demonstrates a degree of selflessness which shows that he does not put honor and glory above the well being of others. This is necessary because it proves Beowulf would never prioritize his pride over human life. Additionally, Hrothgar is praising Beowulf’s ability to maintain composure even in the face of overwhelming adversity. Beowulf never once mentions any sort of fear for his own life. In fact, he is described as being “indifferent to death” (Heaney 101) when preparing to face Grendel, which is yet another indicator that he is willing to put his life on the line to help others.

The courage that Beowulf demonstrates in these passages matches the second OED definition (concerning a militaristic perspective of heroism), but he also demonstrates much more than that. While we can comfortably say Beowulf fits the second OED definition, we have also found that Beowulf goes far beyond his “noble deeds” (OED) or prowess in battle. He also demonstrates a great deal of forethought and selflessness which are noticeably lacking in any of the OED definitions. This indicates that the standard for what constitutes a hero established by the OED is intrinsically flawed because the definitions fail to encompass some of the most heroic qualities portrayed by a character widely regarded as a classic conventional hero. From Beowulf

we can see that the problem with these definitions is a strange one in that they are too exclusive in their generality. By this I mean that while the definitions attempt to encompass the general physical properties and actions associated with a conventional hero, they actually exclude the essential personality traits which would otherwise indicate how a character would use those physical strengths. In other words, the definitions account only for what is being done, and not why it is being done or how it is done. Beowulf demonstrates this “why” and “how” when he exhibits wisdom and selflessness in his careful execution of Grendel.

At this point we have discovered that Beowulf possesses the attributes which, according to the OED, qualify him as a hero, but we have also discovered that he possesses qualities that go beyond the OED’s definitions. It is the qualities of selflessness and forethought, which are not included in the OED definitions, that make Beowulf a hero. The measure of a person’s character is based not on what he is, but who he is. A hero is no different. They must possess the willingness to commit selfless deeds as well as the skills to be able to do so. Good intentions do not make a hero, but good intentions coupled with the ability to follow through on those intentions is absolutely necessary for the designation of a hero. We have arrived at a point where we must take this idea of willingness and ability to carry out good deeds and apply it to a different character who does not possess any semblance of the OED’s definitions of a hero. This is necessary because it will show that the OED’s definitions are actually superficial, and that within a character like Pierre Bezúkhov heroism can still be found regardless of military prowess or supernatural power.

As stated above, Pierre is a character who would not even come close to fitting any of the OED’s definitions of a hero. He is often described as clumsy, awkward, and oafish. Indeed

when I first read about his endeavours in Tolstoy's novel I considered him to be, if anything, gullible and bumbling. Unlike Beowulf, Pierre Bezúkhov does not exude a sense of might and power, instead, in one of the first descriptions of Pierre, his facial expression is described as being "clever though shy, but observant and natural" (Tolstoy 8). This is a stark contrast to the first description of Beowulf where we get an image of a man with supernatural strength and abilities instead of the more human and relatable description we get of Pierre. Further, the emphasis of the description is placed on the internal qualities of Pierre which contrasts the more superficial and external characteristics that the OED definitions focus on. This is a signal that Pierre's value and relevance as a character is found in the traits of his personality rather than his actions. This is one of the first indications that Pierre is nothing like a conventional literary hero, but still possesses his own strengths unique from the OED's idea of a hero.

However, one aspect of Pierre that is quite interesting is actually the description we get of his physical size. He is originally described at Anna Pávlovna's reception as a "stout, heavily built man" who was "certainly rather bigger than the other men in the room" (Tolstoy 8). The descriptors are quite vague in terms of distinguishing Pierre as large because he is very strong and muscular, or because he is quite fat; however the terms "stout" and "heavily built" connote a mixture of the two, so it is most likely that Pierre is very strong, but not lean. We have, then, two characters described as being large, physically strong men, but portrayed in almost opposing perspectives. Beowulf is described as being powerful and mighty, while Pierre is described as being large, stout, and heavy with further emphasis placed on his mind instead of his body. The differences in how they are described, while seemingly minor, are actually extremely important for how the reader originally conceptualizes the character in their mind. Pierre's description as

being heavy and stout is more easily associated with the potential to be awkward and clumsy, while Beowulf's description of being mighty and powerful is very easily associated with the conventional idea of a hero. We can see then, that from the very outset of *War and Peace*, Pierre is meant to initially be considered more oafish than heroic. I use the word "initially" very deliberately because Pierre's heroism is not found innately in him, nor does he demonstrate it from the very beginning of the novel. Instead, his heroic qualities come to the surface during the process of intellectual and spiritual growth which Pierre experiences throughout the novel.

The intellectual and spiritual growth that Pierre experiences, and from which we see the growth of his heroic qualities, is a direct result of the hardships he faces and overcomes. In fact, Pierre's growth and development as a character occurs in a cyclic structure of experiencing turmoil and hardship followed by a period of depression and disillusionment where he questions the meaning of existence. Pierre then experiences a rejuvenation of spirit and purpose where he feels a renewed vigor to live life selflessly and optimistically. These periods of tumult are not cycles in the strictest sense because Pierre is different at the end of each one, meaning that at the end of a cycle he is not in the same state he was in at the beginning. However, I will be referring to these periods of hardship and reinvigoration as "cycles" for the sake of simplicity. There are two major instances of these cycles that I will be focusing on. The first begins with Pierre feeling lost and uncomfortable in the social scene, and then through the coercion of those around him he marries H el ene Kur agin, a vile and selfish woman who only wants Pierre's money. H el ene and Pierre have a violent falling out, and as a result Pierre again feels lost and hopeless. He immediately finds refuge among the secret Freemason society in which Pierre believes he will find purpose and motivation. However, Pierre, after observing the actions and conversations

of other Masons, finds that he is dissatisfied with their ritualistic lifestyle as well as the fact that the Masons talk a lot about doing good for the common man, but do not actually take the necessary steps to turn that talk into action. As a result he leaves the Masons and again feels lost and disillusioned with the purpose of life. He then gets caught up in the war with Napoleon and is in Moscow when the French conqueror's army sacks the city. During that same time Pierre begins to lose his grip on reality, believing that he is somehow mathematically destined to assassinate Napoleon. However, through a series of events I will explain in greater depth later, he gets captured by the French army and is imprisoned with a man named Platón Karatáev. Platón triggers in Pierre a revelation so profound that it breaks the cycle of disillusionment and leaves in Pierre an understanding and appreciation of life so powerful that it becomes a part of his soul. This rollercoaster of hardship, resignation, and rejuvenation takes place several times throughout the novel, and it is within these kinds of cycles that we see Pierre's true heroic nature develop and grow. While this may seem like a plethora of context it is important to keep this timeline of events in mind as we go through the different revelations and insights Pierre experiences because the above events are the driving force of Pierre's development and growth.

The first major instance of this cycle is Pierre's separation from his wife, Hélène Kurágin, followed by the resulting disillusionment of his sense of self and the purpose of life, and then completing the cycle by adopting a perspective of altruism and solidarity as a result of his induction into the Freemasons. For the sake of fully understanding Pierre I will examine the period of time where Pierre reaches his lowest point of disillusionment, sadness, and aimlessness. Specifically I will be looking deeper into his duel with the dastardly Dólokhov, and the fight he has with his wife a few short pages later. These are the last events that occur before

Pierre leaves his estate and meets the Freemason, so they mark a serious turning point for Pierre. The duel occurs as a result of Dólokhov, a former good friend of Pierre, sleeping with Pierre's wife H  l  ne, which also spurs Pierre's fight with his wife. Pierre and D  lokhov meet with their seconds in a snowy clearing by the side of the road where they pace, turn, and face each other. Pierre fires first and hits D  lokhov who does not immediately fall. Instead, he stumbles a few more paces and shouts that the duel is not yet over, and a few short steps later he falls to his knees with his shot still unfired. He then pleads, barely getting the word "please" out. What is especially important about this duel is Pierre's immediate reaction to D  lokhov's pleas. Pierre hears D  lokhov's cries, and "hardly restraining his sobs, began running toward D  lokhov and was about to cross the space between the barriers" (Tolstoy 274). Pierre's first reaction to witnessing the damage he has just done to a friend who slept with his wife is to sob and run to his help. This is a clear demonstration of Pierre's innate love for life and all mankind overshadowing the powerful negative emotions of jealousy, rage, and his own pride for the sake of making sure a fellow human being will be okay. This is not to say that Pierre is aware of this love, in fact he is completely unaware of it, yet it is still such a powerful and innate part of who he is that he cannot even exact any sort of retribution against those who wronged him. This shows that despite any negative feelings Pierre could have for anyone, even a former friend who sleeps with his wife, Pierre is intrinsically merciful and sympathetic. Pierre will always choose the preservation of life, love, and kindness over violence and death, and that is a fundamental part of who he is.

Pierre's innate drive to preserve life shows itself again only a few pages later when he finally confronts his wife about her affairs and requests a separation. The most important part of

their conversation occurs at the end of it when Pierre flies into a near murderous rage. The context for Pierre's rage is extremely important because it gives good reason for him to be so infuriated. H  l  ne walks into a room in their house and finds Pierre whom she proceeds to antagonize him by criticizing him for all of the reasons why she thinks he is an exceedingly weak man. She denies sleeping with D  lokhov and instead remarks that Pierre is a fool and the duel only served to prove everyone of such. She even goes as far as to say that D  lokhov, a heartless, vile and reprehensible man known only for his debauchery and cruelty, is "a better man than [Pierre] in every way" (Tolstoy 278). Eventually Pierre has had enough of H  l  ne's insults and requests that they separate to which H  l  ne replies "Separate? Very well, but only if you give me a fortune" (Tolstoy 278). This is important because it confirms that H  l  ne only married Pierre because she wanted the vast fortune he had recently inherited. As a result, Pierre almost completely loses control and becomes enraged. He grabs a large marble table top and moves towards her shouting "I'll kill you!" Tolstoy then includes some insight about another source of this violent fury Pierre is experiencing. Tolstoy says of Pierre "His father's nature showed itself in Pierre. He felt the fascination and delight of frenzy" (Tolstoy 278). These two short sentences offer us valuable information about the turmoil occurring in Pierre's soul in this moment. It shows us that Pierre's inherent love for mankind and altruistic nature is in constant struggle with a violent and malicious part of his nature that he has procured from his father. Additionally, when taken in context with the rest of the novel where Pierre's inherent benevolence shows itself overwhelmingly more than any violent or malicious traits, that same benevolence holds even more weight because it is in constant struggle with his darker side, but prevails nonetheless. In other words, Pierre's argument with H  l  ne shows that Pierre, like

every other human being, has a darker side which is in constant battle with his benevolent nature. A significant part of what makes him a hero is that fact that his benevolent nature is consistently able to win the battle with the darker aspect of his soul. By first winning the battle that occurs within his very soul he is then able to fight and work for the good of others.

After leaving H el ene, an emotional and disillusioned Pierre finds himself at a post station with an elderly man, a Freemason named Joseph Alex evich Bazd ev. They have a conversation about understanding God, and the vulnerable Count Bez ukhov “longed with his whole soul to believe and he did believe, and felt a joyful sense of comfort, regeneration, and return to life” (Tolstoy 306). The Mason is depicting the Freemason society as a united brotherhood with strict ideals devoted to helping their fellow man. Pierre, in a state of deep depression and loneliness, is immediately attracted to the image of the Freemason’s that Bazd ev describes. In Tolstoy’s words, Pierre “firmly believed in the possibility of the brotherhood of men united in the aim of supporting one another in the path of virtue, and that is how Freemasonry presented itself to him” (Tolstoy 309). Pierre is particularly drawn to two aspects of the Mason ideology that Bazd ev portrays, the brotherhood and the path of virtue, because it gives him a community in which he feels accepted and welcomed as well as appealing to his inherent altruism. This is further reflected during his initiation into the Freemason Brotherhood. Pierre, caught up in his own thoughts, does not hear any of the Masonic statutes being read aloud to him by the Grand Mason, except for the last few sentences. Some of the words the Grand Master Mason reads are particularly important: “Fly to a brother’s aid whoever he may be, exhort him who goeth astray, raise him that falleth, never bear malice or enmity toward thy brother... Share thy happiness with thy neighbor... Forgive thy enemy, do not avenge thyself except by doing him good” (Tolstoy

316). These words stand out to Pierre because they are what makes him feel that the Masons are a force for good, and that they cherish helping others, doing good work, and brotherhood over all else. This ideology is exactly what Pierre is looking for in life and aligns quite harmoniously with his own desires to help others. His induction into the Freemason Brotherhood makes him feel “as if he had returned from a long journey”, and what this means is that Pierre feels at home with the Masonic doctrine. However, the fact that the Grand Master’s are words are merely words is no trivial fact. As Pierre later realizes, the Masons are more talk than they are action.

Pierre becomes increasingly disillusioned with the Masonic order because he observes that they “swear by the blood that they are ready to sacrifice everything for their neighbor, but they do not give a ruble each to the collections for the poor” (Tolstoy 477). What is particularly interesting about Pierre’s observation here is that he does not believe that his fellow Masons withhold their rubles out of greed, instead he believes that they have accepted the fact that their lifestyle is deceptive (in the sense that they do not practice what they preach) and are unwilling, or believe themselves unable, to change anything about it. Pierre reflects that the Masons “in the depths of their souls understand [their deception] as I do, and only try not to see it” (Tolstoy 477). In other words, Pierre believes the world that he lives in is inherently deceptive and evil, and that the Masons believe the same thing, but choose to ignore it. This marks the beginning of a tragically low point Pierre, in fact it is the start of his rapid decline into near insanity. This marks the end of the first major cycle.

As stated previously the cycles begin with Pierre becoming unhappy and unsatisfied with his current life and his current state of being. He then finds what he believes is new meaning in the Freemason Brotherhood in the first cycle, and then in the perspective he adopts from Platón

Karatáev during the second cycle. The first cycle began with Pierre becoming unhappy and disillusioned with the life he had started to build around his newly inherited wealth and his marriage to H  l  ne Kur  gin. He duels with D  lokhov and argues with H  l  ne as he finds his aristocratic socialite lifestyle contemptible. He then finds the Masons and adopts their altruistic mentality, but quickly discovers their values only exist in the mind as they never actually perform and altruistic deeds. However, Pierre does not leave the Masonic brotherhood completely empty handed. From his experience with the aristocratic lifestyle he discovers that he finds social functions and parties utterly meaningless, and from his experience with the Masons he discovers that he has a powerful drive to help others selflessly. In other words, Pierre adopts the altruistic mentality while he is a Mason, and while he may lose sight of it during his period of disillusionment after leaving the Brotherhood, it remains a permanent part of his sense of self. The altruistic mentality is something that Pierre feels deeply connected with and is a large part of why he became a Mason in the first place, and the fact that the Masons do not practice altruism is a key factor in why he leaves the Brotherhood. Pierre's connection with the altruistic mentality becomes exceedingly clear first in his attempt to improve the quality of life of his serfs, and then in an important visit with Prince Andrew.

In order to better understand Pierre's new altruistic mindset it helps look at the conversation he has with his good friend, Prince Andrew concerning the manners in which they live their lives in relation to what is good and bad, and how all others should live their lives as well. Prince Andrew asserts that there are "only two very real evils in life: remorse and illness. The only good is the absence of those evils. To live for myself avoiding those two evils is my whole philosophy now" (Tolstoy 335). Pierre wholeheartedly disagrees with Prince Andrew's

philosophy. Count Bezúkhov believes that to “live only so as not to do evil and not to have to repent is not enough. I lived like that, I lived for myself and ruined my life. And only now when I am living, or at least trying’ (Pierre’s modesty made him correct himself) ‘to live for others, only now have I understood all the happiness of life” (Tolstoy 335). For clarity’s sake, the text in the parentheses is the narrator’s own comment on Pierre’s words. This will be important later. Here, Pierre is referring to the fact that at the outset of the novel he was more concerned with drinking, partying, and sex than he was with the condition of his fellow human beings. It is very apparent that Pierre has experienced personal growth in the form of the reorganization of his priorities. Rather than concerning himself with debauchery and pleasure for the sake of a feigned happiness, Pierre has grown to understand that living selflessly for the sake of benefiting others provides a much more fulfilling sense of happiness. He believes Prince Andrew’s perspective is absolutely unacceptable because it is self-centered and entirely detrimental to the notion of a common good for mankind. This stance which Pierre takes on altruism is one of the first heroic characteristics he portrays. As seen with Beowulf, this desire and motivation to do good for the sake of benefiting others is essential for determining if a character is heroic. The selflessness and desire to help others that Pierre demonstrates is also a recurring characteristic. Despite the cycles of turmoil and resignation that follow this conversation with Prince Andrew, Pierre continues to exhibit altruism in various forms. However, as stated earlier, the intention and motivation to do good for the sake of others is not enough to distinguish a character as a hero because without the execution of said intention it means nothing because it results in nothing. Feeling a drive to do something is not the same as actually doing that thing. Additionally, the

care and precision with which the intention is carried out dictates the circumstances of the ensuing results. Pierre is, unfortunately, guilty of such a contradiction.

Prior to the conversation with Prince Andrew, Pierre, with his new found altruistic attitude, attempted to improve the lives of his serfs with the goal of one day liberating them entirely. However, Pierre had no knowledge of how to carry out such a task, so he delegated it to his steward. Unfortunately, the steward was a cruel man who abused the serfs and maliciously manipulated the surface appearance of their conditions for the sake of convincing Pierre his reforms were working. At the point of the conversation with Prince Andrew, Pierre is completely unaware of the futility of his attempted reforms. While Pierre exhibits the heroic trait of altruism, he lacks the necessary knowledge and commitment to see his intentions carried out properly. Albeit, it is not directly Pierre's fault his reforms were detrimental to the serfs, but he is responsible for the management of his steward, so he is certainly indirectly responsible. This is not to make an argument that Pierre should not be considered a hero, rather it is to show that Pierre still has a lot of intellectual and spiritual growth before he can fully develop his heroic qualities. It is as a result of this continual growth, especially from this particular mistake, that Pierre is able to develop the heroic characteristics necessary to earn him the designation of a hero. However, it takes a great deal of hardship for him to grow and the ensuing heroic qualities to flourish. This hardship comes in the form of his disillusionment with the Freemason Brotherhood which marks the beginning of the next cycle. Again, these cycles start with a period of depression and disillusionment for Pierre. He then finds happiness and acceptance in a new lifestyle or perspective, but ultimately finds faults with these and becomes disillusioned again. The cycles end as Pierre begins to lose faith in his new lifestyle and feels hopeless, and

this is simultaneously where the next cycle begins. Just as when tracing a circle you end where you began, so does Pierre's cycle begin and end with his loss of meaning.

The conversation with Prince Andrew has shown us that Pierre possesses the necessary mindset for altruism, but the incident with the serfs highlighted Pierre's fault in the ability to properly follow through with said altruism. This fault, however, was the result of indirect inaction, by which I mean it was Pierre's gullibility and misplaced trust in his steward that interfered with the Pierre's own plan to help the serfs, rather than laziness or apathy. We see that when Pierre is placed in a situation that requires immediate physical action for the sake of saving someone else's life at the risk of his own, he is able to act to rise to the challenge and do what is needed to be done.

Much later in the novel, whilst Pierre is in the midst of the resignation and self-doubt phase of the aforementioned cycle, the French army invades Moscow where Pierre is living at the time. Unsurprisingly, this invasion sends the city and its residents into utter chaos all while French soldiers are looting and burning the city. During all this upheaval and violence, Pierre is on the brink of insanity after having become disillusioned with the Freemasons and then convincing himself that he is numerically destined to assassinate Napoleon. Waking up one morning with this very intention, he sets out for a walk along the streets of Moscow looking for the French conqueror, but instead comes across an extremely distressed family. The mother of said family pleads for Pierre to rescue her daughter whom they left inside their burning house. Pierre accepts, and the maid is sent with him to lead him to the house. The description of how this task makes Pierre feel is a major indicator that the altruistic tendencies Pierre learned from the Freemasons are now an integral part of his character. He is described as feeling "as if he had

come back to life after a heavy swoon. He held his head higher, his eyes shone with the light of life, and with swift steps he followed the maid” (Tolstoy 822). Pierre’s initial reaction is that of someone who is carrying out what they believe is their purpose in life, and is therefore rejuvenated. The opportunity to help another human being who cannot help herself immediately reinvigorates Pierre’s feeling towards life. He relishes the chance to help another because that is what he feels is his purpose in life which is a distinct recollection of the altruistic qualities he acquired as a Freemason. The assistance Pierre desires to provide here is different from the aid he attempted to provide to the serfs working on his estate because it is immediate and direct. This tells us that Pierre’s altruistic tendencies are much more than fleeting desires, but are instead deeply rooted characteristics which simply needed the right circumstances in order to manifest. However, Pierre’s motivations go beyond mere altruism. His altruism is actually motivated by an even deeper, more powerful notion than the desire to help.

At this point we have adequately demonstrated what the necessary qualities are for a character to be distinguished as a hero. A character must simultaneously possess the will and motivation to perform good deeds without any reason other than the desire to help others, as well as the physical capabilities to perform those deeds. They must be able to couple their altruistic motivations with whatever physical capabilities they possess, and do so solely for the sake others. Having done away with the superficiality of the OED definitions and established our own, more suitable definition, it has come time to address the second part of our task; discovering what makes Pierre Bezúkhov extraordinary among the ranks of heroes. Pierre more than adequately shows that he fits our definition of a hero, but what really makes Pierre stand out not only as a character in general, but as a hero, is at the core of his soul. Pierre has within him,

whether he fully realizes it or not, an innate, selfless and universal love of mankind, life, and all things living. His belief in the sanctity of life is something that he carries throughout the entirety of the novel, however it is not an aspect of himself that he is entirely aware of, and struggles to fully embrace throughout his tumultuous journey. In the following paragraphs I will show it is this love which Pierre possesses that distinguishes him from all other characters, and is that which raises him above the standard of hero already established.

As demonstrated above, Pierre feels most at harmony with himself when he is selflessly helping others. This is due to the fact that Pierre possesses a deep and powerful love for all of humankind. It is this love for life, this belief in the sanctity of vitality that truly distinguishes Pierre as a hero, and which demonstrates that he is the purest form of a hero. However, just like his altruism, this love within him for life is something he is not entirely aware of nor does he completely understand it. Similar to the above example it takes a powerful catalyst to bring this love, and the realization that it was within him all along, to the surface. This catalyst exists in the form of the juxtaposition of great cruelty with total forgiveness and complete contentedness, which he sees during his time as a prisoner with Platón Karatáev.

Shortly after Pierre saves the little girl from the fire in Moscow he comes across a woman being assaulted by a Frenchman, so he intervenes to help her thereby continuing to demonstrate his desire to help anyone in need. However, the ensuing scuffle with the Frenchman attracts the attention of some Polish soldiers working for the French army looking for troublemakers and vagabonds. As a result of the altercation, Pierre is imprisoned with a group of other troublemakers and placed under the watch of the French army. Here he meets Platón Karatáev who finds himself a prisoner because he took some wood from a less than generous landowner.

However, Platón is not the least bit upset at his being flogged, imprisoned, and conscripted into the French Army because it meant that his brother, who has a wife and five children, could stay and look after his family. Platón does not care that his situation is dire, instead he is simply content that it is he who is forced to serve rather than any of his younger brothers. All of this context is important because Platón is the major driving force of Pierre realizing that life is always worth living no matter what the situation, and especially when it is lived for the sake of others.

The powerful effect Platón's perspective has on Pierre is apparent in Pierre's reflection on their first conversation together. After Platón explains how he ended up as a French prisoner, he bids Pierre goodnight and says a prayer that Pierre has never heard before, a prayer for horses because "one must pity the animals too" (Tolstoy 859). This clearly shows that Platón believes in the sanctity of all life and this has an immediate impact on Pierre. Right after Platón's remarks Pierre lies down to sleep and listens as "sounds of crying and screaming came from somewhere in the distance outside, and flames were visible through the cracks of the shed" (Tolstoy 859). Despite these sounds of violence, Pierre cannot help but feel "that the world that had been shattered was once more stirring in his soul with a new beauty and on new and unshakable foundations" (Tolstoy 859). This experience of a shattered world to which Pierre is referring is an event that occurred shortly before Pierre met Platón. On page 856, only three pages before the stirring of his soul, his world is shattered when he witnesses the brutal execution of Russian civilians by French soldiers. Pierre sees how hard it was for the individual soldiers to commit what Pierre firmly believes is murder, and it causes him utter despair because

it was as if the mainspring of his life, on which everything depended and which made everything appear alive, had been suddenly wrenched out and everything had collapsed into a heap of meaningless rubbing....his faith in the right ordering of the universe, in

humanity, in his own soul and in God, had been destroyed....He felt that it was not in his power to regain faith in the meaning of life (Tolstoy 856).

The faith in the order of the universe, humanity, himself and God is the shattered world he is regaining hope in after hearing Platón's prayer. With this distinct contrast in perspectives before and after his conversation with Platón we can see how much of an impact Platón's view of the world has on Pierre's. Pierre meets him literally right after having viewed the execution, so his world is still very freshly shattered, but Platón is still able to have an immediate and rejuvenating impact on Pierre's perspective. This demonstrates that while Pierre may have believed "it was not in his power to regain faith in the meaning of life", he actually never lost that faith, otherwise Platón would not have so easily been able to reawaken it within him with his simple prayer. Additionally, the brief length and casual nature of the conversation between the two prisoners emphasizes that Pierre, despite outwardly feeling complete and utter despair for humanity, still possessed a glimmer of hope deep within his soul. All it took was Platón's story and a short prayer to the patron saints of horses to reawaken Pierre's hope for the state of humanity and the belief in the sanctity of life.

The fact that the above mentioned glimmer of hope and faith in life was always still within Pierre becomes even more apparent when examining the language used in his reflection. In his internal monologue he says "that the world that had been shattered was once more stirring in his soul with a new beauty and on new and unshakable foundations." The foundations to which he is referring to here are his deep seated beliefs in the sanctity of life and the love for life, and the reason they are unshakable is due to the fact that he is finally recognizing them directly and embracing them. These beliefs are referred to as "new" not because they came solely from Platón, but because Pierre had never fully realized them himself. Previously he had only

recognized certain aspects of them, such as the altruism he displays during his time as a Freemason, but only now is he beginning to fully realize that these beliefs comprise the core of who he is. They are intrinsic to his soul, or in other words it is his destiny to be this lover of life, to be a champion for the weak, to embrace and advocate for all the good in the world. Only by fully realizing these beliefs can Pierre completely embrace who he truly is, and finally be happy.

The notion that Pierre possesses an innate love for life is further proven by the fact that the insights and revelations that Platón helps him realize remain with Pierre even after Platón's death. This is an essential aspect in proving that Pierre possesses this love for life because if he simply forgot his revelations and insights then the whole time with Platón, and all of the discoveries Pierre made about himself and life in general, would all be for nothing. Therefore, it is necessary to show that everything Pierre learned from Platón has a lasting effect on his attitude and perspective. There is perfect evidence for this in one of Pierre's internal reflections after having been rescued from the French army. It is important to note that at this point in the story Platón has been dead for several months prior to the Pierre being rescued, and then at least another three months pass before Pierre has the following reflections. This is important to note because it shows that more than enough time has passed for Pierre to have moved on from or forgotten everything that Platón helped him realize. Further, the events that occur between Platón's death and Pierre's reflections are grand enough in scale and relevance to Pierre that they could have overshadowed any memories of Platón, such as being freed from his imprisonment and reacquainting himself with peaceful society. However, as we will see, no overshadowing occurred. After recovering from his severe illness, Pierre is asked what he is going to do next,

spurring him to realize that for the first time in his life he is not worried about what comes next.

Instead, he has learned to

see the great, eternal, and infinite in everything, and therefore--to see it and enjoy its contemplation--he naturally threw away the telescope through which he had till now gazed over men's heads and gladly regarded the ever-changing, eternally great, unfathomable, and infinite life around him. And the closer he looked the more tranquil and happy he became. (Tolstoy 977)

Here we get the most accurate and concise description of the perspective and insights Pierre has discovered. In his own words he is finally expressing the truth which he had been seeking from other sources, such as his marriage and his time with the Freemasons, was actually all around him this whole time. He simply had to look within himself in order to be able to recognize it. The phrase about throwing away the telescope refers to the perspective he had of looking for truth in some higher, unreachable power. He tried to find meaning in marriage, but it was a false love and so it offered him nothing but sorrow. He then tried to find it with the Freemasons and their rituals and ideology, but he was not ready for their lifestyle and gave it up. These attempts at finding meaning failed because Pierre was searching for it either in a place he would never find it. The only place he could find the truth he was seeking was within himself. That is why he discarded this flawed lens and instead looked for meaning in himself and in the world around. The Freemasons tried to teach Pierre that meaning could only be found through appeasing God and worshipping Him as the one true deity, but Platón helped Pierre realize that God is not some mystical being above everything else, but is instead in everything and everything is in him. In other words, Pierre finds God in life and in the world around him, and the closer he looks at this world the more clearly he sees and experiences God, and the more he sees the happier and more tranquil he becomes.

Pierre's love of life and the world around him is not an essential criterion for our definition of a hero. As established previously, a hero is defined by altruistic motivations coupled with the ability to carry out those motivations. Pierre exhibits both of these criteria, and therefore is a hero. However, everything that has been said above concerning Pierre's love of life and the world around him acts as proof that Pierre is a hero among heroes. In other words, Pierre's innate love offers him a distinction when placed among the ranks of other heroes. For example, Hector of the *Iliad* fought the Greeks for his city and for the lives of his people, and is therefore a hero. Beowulf fought Grendel for the safety of the Danes as well as his own men, and as shown above he too is a hero. However, when placed side by side with Pierre, these heroes, and especially their motivations, pale in comparison to Pierre Bezúkhov. This is due to the simple fact that despite Pierre's many opportunities, and despite how much he may have wanted to in certain situations, Pierre Bezúkhov never took a life. When he dueled Dólokhov and wounded him, rather than finishing Dólokhov off, Pierre spared his life despite being legally allowed to take it. When confronted by his greedy, adulterous wife, Pierre restrained himself despite overwhelming feelings of rage and agony. When he was committed to assassinating Napoleon, all it took was a person in need for Pierre to let go of any violent or homicidal intentions. In all of the instances in which Pierre had not only the opportunity but the desire to harm another he chose not to do so, and instead chose mercy and compassion. This is what makes Pierre the truest hero among any that can be found. It may have caused him a great deal of strife during his trials and errors, but ultimately Pierre chose to preserve life in every situation. The love that Pierre feels for all life, even the lives of those that have done him and his loved ones great harm, is a compassionate love. Pierre is not a warrior, nor is he a prince or the son of

a god. Instead, Pierre is a lover. He is a lover of his fellow man and all life on earth. He is the kind of person that should forever be revered, not despite his peaceful and loving nature, but precisely because of this very nature.

In the end Pierre may not save the world or perform some other grand heroic deed like comic books and movies have taught us to expect. Instead Pierre becomes something far more important. He becomes an example of how to view and treat the world with love, respect, and compassion. He does not punch a meteor into smithereens, or prevent a nuclear war, or take out a bunch of nameless henchmen for the sake of foiling some terrorist's evil plan. He's not a superpowered alien or a suave secret agent, but it is precisely his lack of superior skills or ability that make him such an important literary figure. Pierre is ordinary in the sense that he is a human being and nothing more. He is not royalty, he is not the child of a god, and no prophecies were made about him achieving greatness. He does not possess divinely bestowed abilities, nor is he particularly skilled in combat, yet according to the OED these are the requirements for heroism. Pierre has instead shown us that heroes can be found within ourselves. He has given us the hope that we too can perform great deeds simply through the act of showing compassion and love for those most in need of it. Pierre's love for life and all things living is the source of his heroism, but it is not something that is necessarily unique to him. Pierre has shown us that we are all capable of good, selfless deeds, and in doing so has become all the more heroic, for if one good deed can inspire another, then the world will be a better place.

This essay aimed to accomplish three goals. The first was to determine that the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of a hero falls short of encompassing the necessary aspects of what a hero should be. The main problem with the OED's definitions were that they focused

mainly on attributes which say nothing about the motivations for a character's actions. The second was to establish my own definition of a hero through an examination of Beowulf that focuses on the internal aspects of a character so that a hero is determined not solely by action or supernatural or divine abilities, but is instead determined by acts of good will motivated by selfless altruism. In order to be a hero a character must demonstrate the desire to do good and help others as well as the ability to physically act on that desire. The action is necessary because theoretical acts of goodwill have no effect on those that are most in need of help, but the motivation for that action must also be entirely selfless in nature. I showed that Beowulf was revered because of the selfless acts of goodwill he performed towards the Danes, as well as his willingness to put himself rather than his men in danger. He fought Grendel for the sake of preserving Danish lives, and therefore demonstrated the criteria for a hero. Our third goal was to show that Count Pierre Bezúkhov of *War and Peace* not only meets our definition and can therefore be considered a hero, but that his innate love and appreciation for the sanctity of life demonstrates that his motivations for doing good are completely and entirely selfless. He is motivated by his love for all things living in the world.

Having summarized what has been done, I can now reflect on why I have done it, or in other words, what the purpose of this essay is. My primary motivation was to examine how we can determine who is worthy of reverence, and why they should be. I felt that often times were told to consider character's as hero mainly because they are protagonist, but that this was not satisfactory. We should not revere a character or even a living person simply because of the title they are either ascribed or that they may have earned. When I read the OED definitions I was frustrated because I firmly believe that only those that demonstrate purity of heart and

willingness to take action for those that cannot act are deserving of reverence and distinction. Should a soldier be considered a hero if the only reason they enlisted was to kill other people without question? I do not think so. My desire is to have the reader walk away questioning how and why they look up to the people that they do. That being said, it is also important to consider that in this essay I have been talking about characters in stories, and characters, especially those like Pierre who possess no special powers, are modeled after living people, but people can also be much more complex. The histories of their lives are far more comprehensive than could be portrayed in any literary character. Despite this distinction, I believe the notion of questioning who you choose to look up to is still applicable.

Finally I would like to address some possible counterpoints to my argument. Many readers may wonder why I chose Beowulf rather than a classical Greek “hero” like Hector or Achilles, but my reply would be that those stories and those characters have been discussed at length over the course of thousands of years, and therefore do not require any further analysis. It is true that the story of Beowulf is also extremely old, but I felt that examining a character that is not quite as popular as the classical heroes would help to establish originality. The selection of Pierre was based on similar reasoning with the addition that I believe he is such a complex character that not only is he worthy of comprehensive analysis, he demands it. The reader may also feel that my definition is arbitrary and that if I had looked at a text other than Beowulf I would have come up with different criteria, and this may be true, but I feel I have adequately shown that the criteria I extrapolated from Beowulf and used to establish my definition are general enough to be applied to any and all stories. Additionally, even if I had selected a text

other than *Beowulf* the notion that we should be critical of who we choose to revere would still stand.

In conclusion, I believe that now more than ever do we need to be careful and critical of those we put on a pedestal and choose to revere. Who we choose to idolize says a great deal about the kind of people we are both on an individual and a societal scale. We have to be extremely selective about those we wish to represent us. Focusing on one aspect of an individual and determining that that aspect is enough to merit distinction from all others is short sighted and ignorant. If humanity wishes to refrain from chaos we must firmly establish the characteristics and virtues we want to build our societies around, and we must ensure that those we choose to represent us are the embodiment of those values. If we want to put truth and justice above all other virtues, then we must only revere those that are honest and just.

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