A Comparative Study of Heroism in the Epic "Beowulf" and "The Tale of Igor's Campaign"

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Heroism is a literary theme of significant practical importance. Studying heroism in the literature of different nations and ethnicities is a key to deeply understanding the cultural connotations and spiritual world of that nation. This thesis focuses on the Old English epic "Beowulf" and the Old Russian epic "The Tale of Igor's Campaign", comparing and analyzing the similarities and differences in the theme of heroism in English and Russian literature from a cross-cultural perspective. Through an in-depth analysis of the two epics, it precisely dissects the core, presentation forms, and shaping mechanisms of heroism in different cultural contexts.

The heroic spirit of "Beowulf" and "The Tale of Igor's Campaign" reflects the differences in values under different cultural backgrounds: the former centers on the combination of individual strength and collective responsibility, emphasizing the secular sense of mission of the hero; the latter is driven by national survival and loyalty to faith, highlighting the spiritual sublimation in tragic sacrifice. This conclusion can be supported by the following comparative dimensions:

The core qualities of the hero's image aspect. Beowulf is the "perfect hero" who possesses both superhuman strength and a sense of moral responsibility. In his youth, he uses his might to defeat monsters, and in his old age, he sacrifices himself to protect his people from a fire dragon as a king, reflecting the elevation from personal bravery to collective responsibility. The poem repeatedly emphasizes that he is "most generous to the people and most passionate about honor," with the core of his heroism being secular responsibility and honor. Igor's heroic image is more tragic. His expedition, though driven by a sense of personal honor, ends in failure, revealing his recklessness and limitations. Ultimately, his repentance and loyalty to the land of Rus become the foundation of his heroism, embodying the combination of religious redemption and the collective fate of the nation.

The Connection Between Social Background and Heroic Mission Aspect. “Beowulf” is rooted in the Germanic clan society, where heroes earn prestige by defending their people. Its heroism reflects the dual demands of clan society for leaders to possess “strength” and “mercy,” as well as the values of pre-Christian Northern Europe. “The Tale of Igor's Campaign” was created during the period of the fragmentation of Kievan Rus, where heroism is closely intertwined with Orthodox faith. Igor's failure is imbued with religious metaphorical significance, and his process of atonement highlights the collective redemption view within the Orthodox context, where heroic actions must serve the unity of the Rus people and the steadfastness of their faith.

The Narrative Purpose of Heroism Aspects. Beowulf celebrates the role of the individual in maintaining social order through the hero's victory and death. Its heroism is the embodiment of the ideal personality in secular society. The Tale of Igor's Campaign warns of the dangers of division and calls for national unity through the hero's failure and reflection. Igor's tragic campaign becomes a parable of national suffering, with heroism serving to convey historical lessons.

The evolution of cultural values aspects. Shifting from the "supremacy of force" in Homer's epics to the emphasis on virtues in Beowulf, reflects the value demands of Germanic society during the transition from clan tribes to feudal monarchy. The Igor's Campaign integrates Slavic polytheistic traditions with Orthodox thought, where heroism shifts from "personal glory" to "sacrifice for faith and nation"[Высочанская: 310], embodying the spiritual reconstruction of Rus culture in religious integration.

This thesis reveals the profound impact of cultural differences on literary themes and character development, thereby deepening the understanding of the world's diverse civilizations. This thesis attempts to break the binary opposition of "West-East". For example, Beowulf's pursuit of "glory" and Igor's obsession with "the land of Rus" essentially reflect the value conflict between personal honor and the logic of ethnic survival, and this difference needs to be analyzed within the specific historical context of the Norse pirate economy and the politics of the Rus steppes. In today's globalized world, such research may provide a reflective path for civilizational conflicts—when individual heroism collides with the spirit of collective dedication in literature, can we find a spiritual resonance that transcends cultural barriers?

Bibliography

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