The Legend Of Robin Hood

A hero stands up for the minority, the exploited, those oppressed when no one else will rise to the occasion. Many heroes share this capability, but some are different in the way they achieve this. Robin Hood is a special hero, for he is not simply a self-sacrificing outlaw who stood up for the vast majority against medieval England's powerful oppressors. He is also a folklore hero who has been molded into a template to serve many oppressed peoples across different time periods and throughout the world.

The climate of medieval England played a large role in the synthesis of the Robin Hood myth. Medieval England was riddled with powerful tyrants who ruled mercilessly, and oppressed their poverty-ridden subjects who represented the vast majority of any kingdom at the time (David, 2018, documentary). The exact tyrannical ruler specific to any Robin Hood text is irrelevant, for what matters are simply the presence of these oppressive rulers to develop the culture and therefore, ultimately the purpose of the Robin Hood Myth. Normandy's invasion in 1066 was the first wave of ferocious oppression to grip England. This would also trigger a line of future oppressive rulers for years to come (David, 2018, documentary).

On invasion, William the conqueror took over as ruler, and held his kingdom in a vicious grasp of power (David, 2018, documentary). Subjects who were living under any rule of this era, lived under a rigid feudal system. The feudal system's core component is its stress on loyalty to those who rank above you in the system, in class. Many of the people living under this system were tenant farmers, otherwise known as cotters or yeomen, who served the feudal land owners (David, 2018, documentary).

Feudal tenant farmers worked endlessly only to have all their yield confiscated by the feudal lords or the local church in exchange for a minimum quality of life (David, 2018, documentary). While social mobility was nearly impossible anyway due to the immense power differential between the top and bottom, feudal lords gave tenant farmers a much better chance at survival when survival was anything but guaranteed at the time. This was largely the reason for yeomen to be oppressed, for they were essentially forced into remaining servants to the system. If the tenant workers were to ever attempt to leave, death would essentially be imminent.

The justice system was also just as oppressive as the tyrannical kings who gave it power (McGlynn, 2019, pg.13). "Not only did the justice system suffer from a widespread perception of its corruption, but law and order was generally considered to be in a state of disarray," (McGlynn, 2019, pg.15). Hence, corruption polluted England's governing powers, and made it increasingly hard for anyone under this force to get by. Specifically, sheriffs like the Sheriff of Nottingham, Robin Hood's nemesis, and knights of the age were extremely ruthless against anyone who went out of line with the king or an estate owner (David, 2018, documentary). It was also very common for anyone enforcing the law of the land to exploit their power for their own personal benefit, which further fueled the fire of oppression for all the yeomen living under their control (McGlynn, 2019, p.15). Furthermore, the widespread combination of corruption in the feudal and justice system is the main reason as to why the legend of Robin Hood came to be. Robin Hood was a figure who represented freedom and independence, and therefore the poor majority gravitated to his image because that's exactly what they were lacking in their own

lives. He inspired people to think for themselves and act how they please, just as he did in his own life (David, 2018, documentary). Therefore, the portrayal of Robin Hood combined with the way in which he carried himself caused common folk to think outside the feudal system.

The story of Robin Hood first appears in many various different texts such as Piers Plowman, The Gest of Robin Hood, as well as the ballads of Robin Hood. However, for the purpose of this research, the focus of his actions and heroism are going to be concentrated on the text, The Gest of Robin Hood. This is due to the slight variation of Robin's character from text to text, and therefore the focus is on the Gest of Robin Hood for its specific portrayal of medieval England as well as Robin and the other characters of the gest.

Robin Hood is an English outlaw who is known for pillaging from the rich and giving back to the less fortunate, yet a thief and killer of men is still one of England's most iconic heroes (Hilton, 1958, pg.30). This further highlights the extent to which Robin Hood's impact and persona impacted England. Robin's story first begins in a forest, specifically that of royal ownership, likely being either the forest of Sherwood or Barnsdale (David, 2018, documentary). Inside this forest, the legend of Robin and his company of other outlaws, most noticeably Little John, commence. Robin Hood, as the figurehead of his outlaw gang, sets the culture for their organization. The culture and values he created for his people were admired by the yeomen, for they finally had a protector, and a fighter who acted in their best interest. One of the main values Robin instills in his crew is to do no harm to any husbandman or yeomen, otherwise known as farmers or feudal servants (Keen, 1961, pg.11). However, Robin also states, specifically in the gest, no harm shall come to any knight nor squire who possesses good character (pg.11). A common misconception in the Robin Hood myth is he simply took from the wealthy and gave to the destitute, yet this is not the case. "Men of the period, both humble and gentle, accepted a stratified society: what they resented was the abuse of officials or social position," (Keen, 1961, pg.7). Therefore, it was not simply the poor and outcasts versus the nobile elite, but respectable people versus oppressors and exploiters.

One of the reoccurring events in the tales of Robin is his approach to outlawry. After inviting a guest to a feast, he asks the guest how much currency they currently have on them (Knight, 1997, pg.1). If they are to tell the word of god, Robin will not take anything and will even lend them money if need be (pg.1). However, if a subject is to lie, Robin will take all they have. In one instance in the gest of Robin Hood, Robin and Little John humbly welcome a knight to a feast at their hideout in the forest, as they do for every guest who passes through their forest (pg.1). In the case of the knight, the knight did not lie and shared his story with Robin and company (pg.1). The knight's son killed a knight of Lancaster, and the Abbot of St. Marys declared he shall owe 400 pounds (pg.1). The knight did not have the money, so he had to pledge all of his assets until he could come up with the necessary capital (pg.1). Robin, as generous as he is, not only gives to him 400 pounds, but also new clothes, a new horse, new saddle as well as a pair of shining guilt spurs (pg.1). Furthermore, Robin shows his selflessness and admirable character by assisting the knight in the way that he did. However, on the contrary, Robin Hood also does not stand for immoral people and unjust actions. When one monk comes through the forest, he too is invited to a feast, but lies, saying he has little money on him when in reality he had over 800 pounds on his person (pg.1). Robin takes all his money, sends him on his way, and eventually gives a good sum of the money back to another traveler later in the gest (pg.1).

Robin Hood, whether a real outlaw or not, was surely not the only one at the time. In fact, there were many outlaws, most were not as fair and just as Robin is portrayed. Outlaws mostly

resided in forests, specifically forests of royal stature, and pillaged or killed those who were passing through (David, 2018, documentary). On top of this, royal forests were already dangerous enough, for by kings decree everything from the firewood that would be gathered from trees or the meat from deer were all the kings' property (David, 2018, documentary). Failure to comply resulted in very harsh punishments or even death. Furthermore, any poor farmer who was looking to get a bit of wood or food could be killed by either outlaw or king at a moment's notice. However, because of Robin's current notoriety and clout in England, people traveling through the forest would claim to be part of his following, and more times than not would be left alone because of this (David, 2018, documentary).

Robin Hood was not just a cultural icon during the medieval ages, but has continuously been represented as a symbol for those who have been oppressed and has been celebrated as such ever since. "Every generation has its own Robin, adapted to fit the needs of the time," (McGlynn, 2019, pg.13). This is largely why Robin's story and image are so widely known today. England has used its great medieval outlaw hero, and transformed it into different outlets to apply to oppression and patriotism.

For instance, in 17th century Britain during the civil war of the 1640s, Robin was used in propaganda. James Hind, a royalist soldier and highwayman, acted very similar to Robin Hood in the way he robbed wealthy folk and gave back to poor royalists (McGlynn, 2019, pg.14). Hence, whether Hind was inspired by Hood or not, he was certainly perceived as Robin Hood esc, which inspired royalists (pg.14). In 1859, a voluntary military regiment was named after Robin Hood, the Robin Hood Rifles (Barczewski, 2005, pg.13). A writer discussing the regiment stated the undoubtable parallel between Robin Hood and patriotism for England regarding the regiment (pg.13). In 1990, Little Red Robin was written and used as a patriotic piece to illustrate similarities between Robin and his fellow outlaws to soldiers during the Boer War (Barczewski, 2005, pg. 12). Robin and his men are written to be perceived as loyal Englishmen who will never turn their back on their country (pg.12). They even agree to joining the crusades after King Richard the lion heart travels to Sherwood Forest and requests their service (pg.12). Furthermore, because of Robin Hood's deep roots in English culture, he was used in inspiring patriotic feelings in the people of England during the Boer War. Another case of Robin Hood being morphed into a hero of a different cause is in 1980 under Britain's show, Robin of Sherwood (McGlynn, 2019, pg.15). The show was perceived to be combatting free market economic policies by their conservative government of the time (pg.15). Robin of Sherwood was attempting to shed light on the policies which, "…Adversely affected the poorer and weaker members of society who lost out to big business and rulers who lacked compassion," (pg.15). This is a direct parallel to the weaker members of society who were taken advantage of by the oppressors of medieval England.

One of the ways in which Robin Hood is celebrated in England culture, which further exemplifies his heroic impression on England, is through festival culture, specifically, the May Games (Hilton, 1958, pg.31). The May games play an immense role in the Robin Hood story and the culture of England today. "For as a result of his long association with this variegated festival of mumming, dancing and frolic celebrated about Whitsuntide to herald the renewal of life, the ballad hero became a dramatic hero, added to his band of followers two of the most celebrated-Maid Marian and Friar Tuck-and achieved a spectacular popularity, lasting nearly three centuries, among virtually all estates of the English and Scottish people," (Simeone, 1951, pg.265). A big part of why Robin is still so popular as a folk hero and tale in England is because of his involvement in the games and festivals alike. It is because of this involvement that lead to

the May Games evolving into much like a saints' day for outlaws like Robin and company (Simeone, 1951, pg.270). Common folk in England loved attending the May Games because of its appreciation and recognition for what Robin Hood represented and did for them as a people. So much so that even church activities were cancelled while the games were taking place (pg.270). The fact that an outlaw folk hero takes traffic away from church in conservative England attests as to how popular he really was and continues to be. Robin Hood also performed a number of different rituals at the May Games, indicating his cultural importance (Barczewski, 2005, pg.20). The May Games always featured a crowning of a faux king, yet Robin was usually always the one to be crowned (pg.20). Robin Hood was essentially the real king in the eyes of the yeomen. He was also involved in a rather large performance with other characters, and oversaw the games in general at smaller festivals (pg.20). Additionally, the May Games served as the initiation of Summer, and Robin was used as its symbol (pg.20). This is due to Robin's relationship with forests as well as his green attire (pg.20). Today, the May Games still take place, and people from all over the country come to celebrate Robin Hood, outlawry, and medieval culture which includes dancing, knightly activities, and cosplaying Robin Hood and his gang of outlaws (Hilton, 1958, pg.31).

Another way in which the Robin Hood legend is celebrated is within visitors centers throughout England today. The establishment of visitors centers is a homage and celebration of the way in which Robin Hood lived (Hahn, 2000, pg.13). Robin Hood initially created this idea of a visitors center by way in which he invited guests over to feast and be merry, and in the end he would either rob them of their currency or send them home with some (pg.13). However, in 1980, a visitors center was created to similarly entertain guests and obtain currency, but not by way of thievery but a giftshop on the way out (pg.13). The center brings people into a rather big space such as a church or mall and has pieces of facts and objects for people to find and learn more about (pg.13). The information being presented is supposed to represent what medieval culture would have looked like. and the tales of Robin Hood acting as a magnifying glass for the history in this sense. There are automated people like the oppressive Sheriff of Nottingham and Robin who project audio, and act to give the audience a robin hood simulation (Hahn, 2000, pg.17). Henceforth, the visitor centers in England provides a great educational and fun experience to be submerged into everything Robin Hood. This also goes to show the level of clout Robin Hood still yields in England to this day.

Not only has Robin Hood affected medieval and modern English culture, but he has also touched many from other cultures, especially within the United States. His outlaw status and values as a good yeoman have heavily influenced other outlaw folk heroes and tales. Robin hood is a leader of socially and economically oppressed peoples, and this view of him has directly translated to the genesis of other folk hero outlaws such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid. Theodore Roosevelt noted, "There is something very curious in the reproduction here on this contingent of essentially the conditions of ballad growth which obtained in medieval England, including, by the way, sympathy for the outlaw, Jesse James taking the place of Robin Hood," (Steckmesser, 1966, pg.348). Jesse James was an American outlaw affected by the civil war (Steckmesser, 1966, pg.349). He didn't cause farmers any trouble in his wrongdoings just as Robin Hood did not cause any harm to husbandmen (pg.349). Jesse also only robbed from banks and railroad express companies, just as Robin Hood only took from the undeserving wealthy or exploiters of power (pg.349). The law of the land was used as a weapon against Jesse and his people much like it was a weapon against Robin, outlaws, and tenant feudal farmers. After the American Civil War, Jesse was oppressed by yankee law, and had to live outside of those laws to bring justice for him and his family (pg.349). This is extremely similar in

how Robin Hood used his outlawry for the betterment of oppressed people. In the tales of Robin, Robin lends 400 pounds to Sir Richard Lee, so he may pay back his debt to the cruel Abbot of St.Marys (Steckmesser, 1966, pg.350). However, Robin ends up getting his money back and then some after he steals 800 pounds from the abbot's clerk after riding through Sherwood, only to give a portion of that sum away as well (Steckmesser, 1966, pg.351). The folk stories of Jesse James portray a similar reality for him as well, as it was believed Jesse once lent $800 to a poor widow who was abused by a banker (pg.351). After he lent her the money, Jesse stole the $800 right back from the banker on his way home (pg.351). Therefore, Jesse James practiced outlawry very similarly to Robin Hood in the way he always looked after those who were oppressed and taken advantage of, and gave them hope.

Billy the Kid was another American outlaw was also very similar to Robin Hood. Billy lived in Southeast New Mexico during the 1870s and lived during a time with substantial oppression, corruption, and violence (Steckmesser, 1966, pg.349). He stole from wealthy white people and gave back to poor Mexican farmers (pg.349). This is the same scene from medieval England; widespread corruption forces outlaw to take from the oppressors, and give to the oppressed and needy. Billy's employer tried to change the system, but was killed and cheated by it instead, so Billy took the law in his own hands just like Robin Hood (pg.349). "Opposition to the established system is the only way to justice," (pg.349). This is true for both Robin and Billy, for the only way they could have brought justice for their culture, and for the everyday people was to go against the system which forced them to fight in the first place. Just because there are laws of the land, does not mean those same laws are always just and fair to those who abide. Billy was also seen as a very likeable guy much like Robin (Steckmesser, 1966, pg.351). Robin was referred to as jolly Robin in the ballads, and had that persona of being kind and fair if one was kind and fair back to him (pg.351). Billy was known as being a laughable and likeable guy who would take the shirt off his back for someone else (pg.351). Furthermore, Billy the Kid and Robin Hood were both very admired and respected for their moral character and selflessness above their outlaw status.

Robin Hood also has a powerful influence on modern day American super heroes. DC Comics made a Robin Hood type character in 1941 called Green Arrow (McGlynn, 2019, pg.15). The significance of his bow, arsenal of arrows such as gas arrows and a boxing glove arrow, as well as his green attire made it clear he is a modern Americanized spinoff of Robin Hood (Hahn, 2000, pg.22). However, despite this, Green Arrow showed little resemblance to Robin Hood in his character until his character was altered to meet new comic demands (pg.22). There was no actual intent to make green lantern a direct spinoff of Robin Hood, "But the result was inevitable: a bowman, socially displaced, and an iconoclastic questioner of authority," (Hahn, 2000, pg.24). At first, Oliver Queen, green arrow, was an established millionaire and had the comparisons of batman (Hahn, 2000, pg23). However, upon green arrows revamp, he not only became a mustached archer, but a warrior for justice among the common people just as Robin was (pg.23). Robin Hood has evolved slightly over time in the texts of medieval England and was tweaked slightly to pose as a symbol for more than just a yeoman. Later myths place Robin as a displaced aristocrat, and given that green arrow used to be a wealthy millionaire, this adds to their similar nature (Hahn, 2000, pg.24). Green Arrow begins his story as an already established wealthy man who parties on his yacht, and is characterized as ungentlemanly before he makes his Robin Hood transition (pg.24). Green Arrow ends up astray from his yacht, and lands himself on a deserted island where he learns he enjoys a simpler life than what he's used to (pg.24). This displacement, similar to Robin's in later myths, has molded green arrow to the protector of poor communities that he has become. Oliver Queen, green arrow, fought

similar injustice to Robin Hood. In one instance, Green Lantern, another super hero from the DC universe, sees a business man get pushed by a young man in an inner city neighborhood (Hahn, 2000, pg.25). Green lantern takes the young man to the police but then faces retaliation when a riot starts to brew (pg.25). However, green arrow appears at the perfect time, and explains to the green lantern that the businessman is actually a slum landowner who refused to fix the complex and tried to evict many of the residents (pg.25). Therefore, the green arrow acted very similarly to Robin, for Robin Hood would help the poor yeomen against their feudal landowners or wealthy abusers of power such as the Abbot of St.Marys.

In conclusion, Robin Hood is a special hero who has stood the test of time, and will continue to serve as a selfless protector of oppressed people. He not only inspired and became apart of the national identity of feudal farmers and modern-day English folk alike, but his legend has, and will continue, to be altered to be suitable for new generations and various cultures. Furthermore, moving forward, the outlaw hero Robin Hood will be used to fight modern day injustices throughout the world, regarding the exploitation of power against the weaker majority.