

# “Heroic weapons”

The Use of Weapons by Old and Modern Heroes

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English Language and Culture: History,  
Genre Identity 5690 words

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17 February 2020

Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen *Versie september 2014* VERKLARING  
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## Abstract

This study explores the use of weapons in both literature and films. It focusses on three categories: weapons that make a hero special, heroes that make a weapon special and heroes who are weapons themselves. The use of special weapons has been around in literature for centuries and has in turn made its way into the world of filmmaking. Weapons often serve as a symbol or an icon for a hero. Even without having seen one Marvel film, most people would be able to recognize the pattern on Captain America's shield. Yet there are heroes who actually need weapons in order to become a hero or regain their heroic status. It is also possible for heroes to make common weapons special, such as Robin Hood and his bow and arrow. Another possibility is that some heroes are so powerful, they do not need weapons to fight; their strength is their weapon. This study highlights certain weapons from both old and modern sources, such as the poem *Beowulf* and the *Star Wars* films.

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## Introduction

The wielding of a weapon by a hero has been a part of heroic literature for centuries. In *Beowulf*, for example, Beowulf uses a sword which was once wielded by giants to slay Grendel's mother. The sword is so heavy that only Beowulf is able to lift it. This idea of a certain hero wielding a special weapon has survived to modern heroes. The superhero Thor, for example, who appeared in the Marvel comics for the first time in 1962, uses an enchanted hammer called Mjolnir, which only he and those worthy of its power can wield. It is, however, also possible that a hero makes a weapon special. Take Robin Hood's bow and arrow for example. In the countless stories and movie adaptations that have been made about this legendary outlaw, he always uses a bow and arrow to fight the evil Sheriff of Nottingham and Prince John. The weapon itself, however, is nothing special. It is just a regular bow and arrow, but it is through Robin Hood's skill that this particular weapon has become special and is therefore always associated with him. A third possibility is that the hero is so powerful that he or she does not need a weapon to fight; they are themselves a weapon. One of the most well-known examples is The Incredible Hulk, a superhero who is nigh unbeatable due to his inherent strength.

Grindley (2004) claims in his article *The Hagiography of Steel: The Hero's Weapon and Its Place in Pop Culture* that weapons "...contribute little to the overall narrative structure of a text but contain a concentrated symbolic functionality". In other words, a weapon is not considered an important part of the story, but it serves as a symbol for either a hero or what the hero stands for, such as Captain America's shield. This shield consists of four circles with a star in the centre of it, painted in the colours of the American flag. Dittmer (2005) notes that Captain America was given a defensive weapon rather than an offensive one because the shield is "...indicative of his association with the American geopolitical script" and that "...it is important for the narrative of America that he embodies defence rather than offense". He argues

that the only reason Captain America was given a shield rather than an offensive weapon was because it fitted the image that Marvel wished to convey about America at the time of publication: that America would always defend others. The shield was the symbol for that and while Captain America sometimes uses it as offensive weapon in the comics and movies, its most important purpose has and always will be to protect the innocent.

Grindley (2004) further elaborates on the idea of weapons being used as a symbol when describing the works of Homer. He states that in the *Iliad*, Homer spends most of book eighteen describing the armour and weapons of Achilles and that "...Homer's text focuses on the divine manufacture of Achilleus' shield, but the poet dedicates more lines to describing the elaborate engravings than he ever spends showing us the thing in action". He further states that Homer describes the shield in a symbolic way, while also noting that "...among mortals only Achilleus had the courage to view the object directly, the reception of its story is necessarily limited to Achilleus, the gods, and Homer's audience". We as readers can read about Achilles's shield, but we would never fully understand it. This is an example of both a hero making a weapon special, because it is the mighty warrior Achilles who wields it, and of a weapon making a hero special, because only Achilles is able to look at it directly and understand the engravings, thus highlighting his heroic status. The spear he uses, which belonged to his father and could only be wielded by those of the same bloodline, symbolises his greatness and makes it useless for other characters to use. When Achilles's friend Patroklos wears his armour and ends up dying in it, the armour itself may be powerful, yet if it is removed from its original owner or context, the meaning of it is almost completely lost. Grindley (2004) further notes that "Ultimately, the armour of Achilleus without its rightful owner becomes the cause of insanity and discord. The fetish item loses its status of medal and becomes a mere badge that at the most provides a surety of the pedigree of its possessor and at the least serves as an arbitrarily or nepotistically ordained recognition of apparent inherent worth". The idea of a weapon, or in this case armour, being

used as a symbol or token of a certain hero is evident in Homer's work, but it loses its status if it is worn or wielded by anyone other than that hero.

Grindley (2004) argues that "...a hero's weapon derives its importance from the hero, not the reverse". The present study explores the truth of this claim by analysing several heroes that make a weapon special but it also considers the role played by weapons in making the hero special, heroes that make a weapon special and heroes who are weapons themselves. The study relies on a broad selection of primary literature which shows that this analysis of the relationship between the hero and weapons transcends time and genre types. Primary sources include Beowulf, King Arthur and Robin Hood. There will also be examples from more modern sources, both (comic) books and films, such as *Thor* and the *Star Wars* films.



## Chapter 1: The Weapon Makes the Hero

There are multiple stories where it is the weapon that makes the hero special. Without this weapon, a hero would not be considered special or not even considered to be a hero at all. A good example of this are the Spartan soldiers, particularly those who took part in the Battle of Thermopylae, which Herodotus describes in his *Histories*. Plutarch (120) gives a very detailed account of the Spartan upbringing and training in his book *On Sparta*. He explains that from the age of seven, Spartan boys would begin their training and would be placed under the care of an older male Spartan soldier. This training was called the *agoge*, which taught them both fighting skills and to obey orders. One of the distinct weapons the Spartans used were their shields. A large part of the *agoge* was how to use the shield. It had to be earned by a Spartan, as it was considered a mark of honour to wield a Spartan shield. Plutarch states that Spartan women would say “return with your shield, or on it” to their husbands or sons before they went into battle. This statement once again underlines the importance of the shield. It means that a Spartan woman would rather have their husband or son die in battle and being brought back by the surviving Spartans on his shield rather than come back alive without his shield. If you had survived but lost your shield, it meant that you had abandoned your fellow Spartans in order to survive, which was considered dishonourable to the highest degree.

In the movie *300*, based on the comic book *300* by Frank Miller, which is in turn inspired by Herodotus’s account of the Battle of Thermopylae, albeit with a much darker tone, King Leonidas of Sparta explains why the shield is so important. In the movie, just before the Battle of Thermopylae, the disfigured Ephialtes comes to King Leonidas and asks to be a part of the Spartan formation against the incoming Persians. Ephialtes explains that his father has received *agoge* training and taught him all he knew, as well as passing on his armour and shield. When Leonidas asks him to raise his shield, however, he cannot do this, due to his disfigurements.

Leonidas tells him that his father should have explained to him how a phalanx, the shield wall where each man protects the man on his left from thigh to neck, works. Leonidas explains that a single weak spot in the phalanx can lead to defeat. He refuses Ephialtes' request, telling him that he cannot use him since he cannot raise his shield high enough, thus he is not able to protect the Spartan to his left. -In this small scene, the importance of this defensive weapon is explained rather well. While Spartan soldiers were exceptionally well trained, their shields were their biggest strength and their most significant and recognisable feature. This is an example of a weapon making a hero, or in this case, heroes.

Another example of weapon making a hero is the magical hammer Mjolnir which belongs to the Norse god of thunder: Thor. There are multiple stories concerning Odin, Thor and Loki in Norse mythology, but these were quite brutal. Marvel decided in 1962 to take the idea of the Norse god of Thunder and his associates and turn him into a superhero, thus making him less brutal and more kid friendly. In both the original Norse mythological version and the Marvel version, Thor carries his signature weapon: Mjolnir. This hammer was forged in the heart of a dying star out of a fictional metal called Uru. Thor can use this hammer to channel his powers of lightning and thunder and use it to defeat his enemies, either through the electricity that erupts from it or simply by hitting the enemy with it.

In the movie *Thor*, which came out in 2011 and was directed by Sir Kenneth Branagh, the importance of Mjolnir to Thor is addressed. Early in the movie, Thor, due to his arrogance and lust for war, goes against his father's orders and takes some of his men to the planet of Jotunheim to punish the leader of the Frost Giants because they had invaded his home realm of Asgard. Because Thor ignored his father's command, he decides that Thor is not worthy of his godly status and Mjolnir and casts him out to Earth in order to redeem himself. He loses all of his powers and arrives on Earth a mortal man. After he is cast out, Odin sends Mjolnir to Earth as well, with the enchantment "Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess

the power of Thor” placed upon it. The hammer lands on Earth and can now only be picked up by someone who is worthy of Thor’s power. When Thor first finds out that Mjolnir has landed on Earth, he decides to go and retrieve it. However, he finds that he cannot lift it, no matter how hard he pulls. He discovers he has not yet redeemed himself and is not a hero anymore. Only when he nearly sacrifices himself at the end of the movie does Odin decide that Thor has redeemed himself and Mjolnir flies back into his hand, restoring his godlike status and powers. What this movie represents is that without his signature weapon, Thor is just a mortal man without any powers at all. He was not worthy of being a god and a hero and thus he could not lift Mjolnir. He might have thought of himself as a hero because of his power, but Odin shows him that power alone does not make you a hero. You have to respect that power and use it for good. It was only when he redeemed himself and possessed some of the qualities which we today associate with (super)heroes, such as modesty, being willing to fight for justice and only fight when it is necessary in order to protect others, that he was able to lift it and become the hero again.

Another well-known example of a weapon making a hero is the sword Excalibur, which belonged to King Arthur from the Arthurian legends. What is interesting about Excalibur, however, is that in modern depictions of the Arthurian legends it serves a different purpose than it did in later medieval stories. In the episode “The Sword in the Stone Part II” (2011) from the BBC series *Merlin* (2008), for example, Arthur loses the will to fight after Camelot has been taken over by Morgana. He feels that he has no right to be King of Camelot and that he has failed his people. In order to help Arthur, Merlin uses his magic to thrust the sword Excalibur into a stone. Merlin then gathers all the people of Camelot and tells Arthur to pull the sword from the stone, claiming that only the true king of Camelot can do it. Even though Arthur himself could not actually do it, Merlin’s magic allows him to pull the sword from the stone and Arthur regains his fighting spirit. In this depiction of the story of Arthur and Excalibur, the

sword is used as an item to make the hero believe in himself again rather than actually giving him the right to rule Camelot, seeing as he was a king already.

In Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, following the death of Arthur's father Uther, who was king of Camelot, a sword is found in a stone with the words "Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England" (Mallory, 1485) written upon it. Arthur, who was brought up by Sir Ector after the death of Uther, decides to help his brother, Sir Kay, who had forgotten his sword by bringing him the sword from the stone. Unbeknownst to Arthur, by pulling the sword from the stone, he was now the king of all England. What is interesting here is that it is the sword alone that makes Arthur special; he himself has done nothing special or heroic. Grindley (2004) notes that "the sword is not a symbol of what Arthur is, only of who he is" and that Arthur "...has done nothing that warrants possession of the sword in the stone beyond the accident of his birth". It is now up to Arthur, as the king of England, to prove he is worthy of wielding such a weapon.

An interesting aspect of Mallory's text is that while early on in the story, the sword in the stone is identified as the sword Excalibur, it is actually a different sword. This first sword breaks after Arthur's battle with a king called Pellinore. After this battle, the wizard Merlin takes Arthur to The Lady of the Lake of Avalon in order to retrieve the true Excalibur. This true Excalibur was said to have power in both the sword itself and in its scabbard. The sword is stronger than any regular sword on this earth, since it was forged in Avalon. The scabbard will prevent you from receiving damage in battle. It becomes clear throughout the story that, once again, only Arthur is allowed to wield this particular weapon. This time, however, it is because of his heroism rather than the accident of his birth. In the story, the treacherous Morgan le Fay, Arthur's sister, wants Arthur to die and steals Excalibur and its scabbard from Arthur, presenting Arthur with a fake sword and her lover Accolon with the true Excalibur and its

scabbard. Arthur is wounded during the fight and is close to death, when the Lady of the Lake takes pity on him. She finds it shameful that a knight as noble and heroic as Arthur would die because of treason. At the final stroke of Accolon which would have killed Arthur, the sword falls from his hands to the earth due to the magic of the Lady of the Lake and Arthur manages to grab it, while also taking the scabbard from Accolon and he throws it away. He spares Accolon, however, because he tells Arthur of Moran le Fay's betrayal. This highlights Arthur's heroism once more: even when he is almost mortally wounded, he shows mercy to his enemy. At the end of the story, after Arthur's death at the hands of Mordred, it is implied that no one should be allowed to wield Excalibur but Arthur. Mark accounts for this by claiming that "Excalibur has come to represent the noblest aspects of the Arthurian legend. Although it is always described as a sword of power, that power is wielded in the best interests of the people, of justice, not in the self-interest of the king" (2017). Arthur commands one of his knights to throw the sword back into the Lake of Avalon, where it is caught by the Lady of the Lake. The whole concept of a weapon defining a hero or only being allowed to be wielded by that particular hero comes to fruition in the legends of Arthur. Because of his heroism, his selflessness and his nobility, only he was allowed to wield Excalibur, which is also the reason why it had to be cast back into the lake where it came from: no one but Arthur should be allowed to wield such great power due to the fear of corruption or destruction the sword brought with it.

The aspect that comes forward through these three examples is that the hero has to earn the right to wield a weapon, whether it is imbued with special powers or not. While the Spartan shields did not carry special powers themselves, the Spartans had to train from the age of seven in order to be allowed to wield them. They had to earn the right to wield the weapon. When they had earned the right to carry it, their shield became their most important weapon, since it allowed them to defend both themselves and their fellow Spartans, which was one of the most

important aspects of their training. Thor's hammer Mjolnir gives him his powers, but he loses both his hammer and his powers due to his arrogance. It is only when he learns the values of being a true hero, such as modesty, selflessness and fighting for others rather than yourself, that he redeems himself and is allowed to wield Mjolnir again, thus regaining his powers. In the medieval story of Arthur, it is only due to Arthur's heritage that he is able to pull the sword out of the stone, thus becoming King of England. He has yet to do something that would actually make him worthy of wielding such a weapon and earning the right to become King. When Excalibur is introduced later in the story, it is due to Arthur's heroism that he earns the right to wield it. These heroes all had to go through an ordeal in order to prove their heroism, which in turn earned them the right to wield a special weapon.

## Chapter 2: Heroes Who Are Weapons Themselves

It is also possible for heroes to be weapons themselves. There are multiple examples of heroes that are so powerful, they do not need weapons to fight. This is evident in the epic poem of *Beowulf*. The poem tells the story of Beowulf, a heroic Geat who sets off to visit the Danish king Hrothgar, whose lands are being terrorized by the monster Grendel. Right at the start of the poem, a description of Beowulf states that “There was no one else like him alive. In his day he was the mightiest man on earth, highborn and powerful” (Heaney, 2012). While Beowulf’s main goal to gain more fame and glory by defeating Grendel, the Danish recognize that he is no mere warrior in a suit of armour; he is a special warrior who might be able to rid the land of Grendel. Schrader (1991) claims that Beowulf seeks glory “...because human praise is the highest goal of the pagan characters, providing justification for individuals and a collective heaven for nations in a world where nearly all the apparent motion leads to dead ends”. For Beowulf, almost nothing is more important than that he himself and his story are remembered for eternity. When night falls, which is when Grendel attacks, Beowulf and his men wait in the mead-hall of the village Heorot for Grendel. It is when the Danish leave that Beowulf decides to shed his armour and weapons, including a weapon that was described as a “smith’s masterpiece” (Heaney, 2012). The reason for this is that Beowulf wants to face Grendel unarmed, just like Grendel is. He states that he sees himself as dangerous as Grendel and that “... it won’t be a cutting edge I’ll wield to mow him down, easily as I might” (Heaney, 2012). This small statement shows that while Beowulf might use a weapon under normal circumstances, which is made special because it is Beowulf who wields it, he chooses not to in the fight against Grendel, seeing as he wants to meet him under fair circumstances and because he believes he would defeat Grendel easily if he were to use a sword. Heaney addresses to the reader in a footnote that it was wise of Beowulf to not use a sword, seeing as Grendel is

protected against all metal weapons by a charm. Laborde (1923) argues that it might not have been a charm, however. He argues that it was due to the toughness of Grendel's skin that normal weapons could not penetrate him. It was then that "Beowulf realised the futility of attacking him with his sword and preferred to trust his muscular strength". The Geats who accompanied Beowulf to fight Grendel sought to end him by using weapons, but due to Beowulf's belief in his own strength he wants to take the monster on hand-to-hand. He manages to rip Grendel's shoulder and arm off his body with his bare hands, fatally wounding him and allowing him to skulk back to his lair to die of his wounds. Despite Beowulf not completely fitting into the current idea of what a hero is, with him slightly boasting about himself and him being mainly it for his own fame and glory, his decision to fight Grendel fairly without a weapon does underline his heroism, seeing as what he does frees the people of Denmark from Grendel's wrath. Grindley (2004) summarizes it by stating that "...no sword is the match for Beowulf; no object can symbolize his worth".

Even though Beowulf uses weapons throughout the rest of the poem, it is in the fight against Grendel that it becomes evident that Beowulf does not need a weapon to fight an enemy which other warriors could not kill, even with weapons. He is so mighty and powerful that he becomes a weapon himself. What is interesting about Beowulf is that he always is this powerful. He does not need to do anything or nothing has to happen to him in order to summon that strength. A more modern example of a hero who something needs to happen to in order to become a weapon is that of The Incredible Hulk.

The Incredible Hulk is a superhero who was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1962. The comics follow the story of Bruce Banner, a gifted scientist who is exposed to gamma radiation after heroically saving a friend. After this accident, whenever Banner experiences significant levels of stress, anger or an emotion of any kind, the timid Banner transforms into



the monstrous Hulk. The Hulk is a being considerably taller than a human, whose raw strength allows him to fight enemies without the need for weapons, with his strength growing the angrier he gets. Even though Hulk loses most of his clear mind when he is in this state, he often uses his power for good, fighting the enemy rather than his fellow superheroes. Yet this is where the danger of the Hulk lies. When Bruce Banner loses control of his emotions while he is in the company of his friends or fellow superheroes, it is possible for Hulk to attack friend or foe alike. This is the reason why Bruce Banner sees Hulk as a disease rather than a hero. The world, however, sees Hulk as a superhero who fights with The Avengers to protect the innocent.

Sayers (2007) refers to Bruce Banner's condition as "The Incredible Hulk syndrome": the presence of opposing personalities inside one person. The calm and timid Bruce Banner is the exact opposite of the strong and intimidating Hulk, which often puts them in conflict with each other. In the film *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), directed by Joe and Anthony Russo, Bruce Banner wants to do something about the Hulk and sets out to find a solution. Sayers (2007) notes that Bruce Banner has accepted that "... anger is best used as a signal of a problem rather than as a means of resolving it". She further notes that it requires trial-and-error in order to overcome this overflowing of emotions and lots of practice to find a suitable solution for this power. In the film, Banner has spent eighteen months in his lab in order to find a solution for his problem, which eventually results in a new, or rather improved, superhero: Professor Hulk. This is the version of the Hulk which Banner has always wanted to become ever since his accident; he has combined his own scientific mind with the power of the Hulk and he is now in full control of his actions, able to think like Banner yet able to fight like Hulk. He is still a hero who is a weapon himself, yet now he is able to think clearly and is in control of his actions, thus he cannot hurt anybody who he does not want to hurt.

What is interesting about these two examples of heroes being weapons themselves is that while Beowulf relishes in his power, Bruce Banner sees the power of the Hulk as a curse.

While they both use their powers for the greater good, Banner would rather use his scientific mind than the strength of the Hulk. Beowulf, meanwhile, fully accepts his superior strength and decides to face an enemy which many warriors were not able to kill unarmed, simply because his enemy was also unarmed. He is so confident in his own strength that it would have been dishonourable for him to face Grendel with a weapon, otherwise the fight would have been over too soon and with too much simplicity. This shows that while heroes can be weapons themselves, it does not mean that they always want to be one.

### Chapter 3: The Hero Makes the Weapon

In addition to heroes that require weapons to be special and heroes who are weapons themselves, it is also possible for a hero to make a weapon special. After Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, Grendel's mother decides to avenge her son and Beowulf needs to fight this new threat. In his fight against Grendel's mother, he uses a sword called Hrunting, which had already seen war and was given to Beowulf in order to help him defeat Grendel's mother. However, it seemed that Grendel's mother was protected by the same charm which had protected Grendel against regular metal weapons, seeing as the weapon refused to bite into her skin. It was then that Beowulf spotted a sword which was described as "... an ancient heirloom from the days of the giants, an ideal weapon, one that any warrior would envy, but so huge and heavy of itself only Beowulf could wield it in a battle" (Heaney, 2012). While this weapon was special in itself, it was now useless seeing as there were no giants strong enough to wield it and it was too heavy for a regular warrior. It was because of Beowulf that the weapon became special once more, because only he had the strength to properly wield it. After he managed to defeat Grendel's mother, he finds Grendel's perished body in the cave. He uses the sword to cut off Grendel's head and take it back as a war trophy. While there were many treasures in the cave, Beowulf decides that he would not take anything from it, seeing as he was already abundant in riches and his glory had been achieved by defeating the monsters. He only takes Grendel's head and the hilt of the sword, seeing as the sword itself had melted due to the blood of Grendel and his mother. While other weapons are mentioned in the poem, the weapons mentioned above underline the heroism of Beowulf and it shows that it is the great warrior Beowulf who makes the weapons special.

Another example of heroes making weapons are the heroes that use one of the most recognisable weapons in pop culture: the lightsaber from the *Star Wars* films. Judkins (2016)

describes a lightsaber as “a weapon of truly fearsome destructive potential with the promise of spiritual renewal”. In the *Star Wars* universe, lightsabers are weapons used by two factions: the Jedi and the Sith. The Jedi are a group of warriors who used the mystical power called The Force, which is described by the Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi as “an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together” (Lucas, 1977) for the good of all beings in the universe. The Sith use The Force for dominion over all beings and for their own gains. Lightsabers are the signature weapons of both the Jedi and the Sith. When a being with an aptitude for The Force is found by the Jedi, it is taken in by them and trained from a young age. When they are old enough, they are allowed to carry the title of Padawan, meaning student, and they are allowed to create their own lightsaber. A lightsaber consists of a hilt with a stone called a kyber crystal inside of it, which powers the lightsaber. In order to create a lightsaber, the Padawan would have to create the hilt and then go out into the galaxy to find a kyber crystal. Once found, the kyber crystal would bind itself to its wielder and change its original white colour to the colour which suited the wielder. This is where it becomes evident that the hero makes the weapon, both in the literal and figurative sense of the word. The kyber crystal knows which trait is the most evident in a being. The most common colours are blue and green: the blue lightsabers are used by Jedi who fight for the good side and they were skilled warriors; the green ones are used by Jedi who preferred to use reason over violence and only used their lightsaber for defence when absolutely necessary. Other colours are purple, whose users use both light and dark side techniques, yellow, whose users are completely fixated by destroying the Sith, sometimes resulting in morally wrong decisions and brown, whose users are extremely strong. When it comes to the Sith, however, the kyber crystal is used differently. The Sith are fuelled by hate and rage, so when a Sith Padawan would find a kyber crystal to construct its lightsaber with, they would use their hatred to let the kyber crystal ‘bleed’, causing the signature red colour which is only present in the lightsabers used by the Sith. A lightsaber

is thus a perfect example of a hero making a weapon, seeing as they actually construct it and their inherent values determine the colour of the lightsaber.

The concept of the lightsaber was developed by director George Lucas, who came up with the idea of the Jedi and their lightsabers by studying Samurai culture. Feichtinger (2014) claims that *Star Wars* presented the world with an idealized version of the samurai: “the image of the samurai as a guard and warrior determined by deep ethical and spiritual values”. This idea of an ethical guard and warrior eventually resulted in the creation of the Jedi and their different values. Lucas himself describes the lightsaber as “a symbol for simpler times, when honour still had importance, more a symbol than weapon” (2014). This agrees with the earlier statement made by Grindley (2004), with a weapon being seen as a symbol. What the Jedi, and by extension their lightsabers, stood for was peace and freedom for the whole galaxy. Their lightsabers were the symbol for those values.

A last example where the hero makes the weapon is that of Robin Hood. While there are multiple heroic archers in literature, such as Legolas Greenleaf from the Lord of the Rings books and Green Arrow from DC Comics, what makes Robin Hood special is that while he is an outlaw, he is still regarded as a hero. Robin Hood is most often described as a hero because he “takes from the rich and gives to the poor”. This gives Robin Hood a special place in heroic literature, because he fights those who create unjust laws, such as Prince John, by breaking them and giving back the money which was taken from the poor. Yet he is still breaking laws, albeit unjust ones, but because he breaks them for a noble purpose, the commonwealth does not see him as a villain or thief, but as a hero who fights for those who cannot fight for themselves. The idea of someone who breaks the law in order to help others is described by Beach (2000) as the “Robin Hood infection” and she claims that “Ideally, there will never be a cure for a Robin Hood infection”.

The weapon most associated with Robin Hood is his bow and arrow. A bow and arrow is not in itself a remarkable or noticeable weapon, but it is arguable that through Robin Hood it has become one of the most recognisable weapons. When we look at one of the stories of Robin Hood called “A Gest of Robyn Hode”, we see that he is extremely skilled with a bow when he and some of his merry men enter a bow shooting contest in disguise. While his men are skilled as well, it states that “When they haddè shot about, These archers fair and good, Evermore was the best, For soothè, Robin Hood” (The Fifth Fytte, rules 53 to 56). Robin Hood has undergone some changes in stories concerning him. In the film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, he was once a nobleman who was robbed of his title by the Sheriff of Nottingham after coming back from the Crusades. He then decides to become an outlaw in order to fight the Sheriff. In the Disney version, however, he is an outlaw at the beginning of the film and there is no mention of him being a nobleman whatsoever. What has remained in all different versions of the story, however, is that Robin Hood is extremely skilled with a bow and arrow. The bow and arrow, however, are never special in the stories or films. It does not imbue him special powers or improved accuracy. It is always a regular wooden bow with regular arrows, but it is through Robin Hood’s skill that it becomes a deadly weapon made special by the wielder.

What becomes apparent through these examples is that a regular weapon, meaning a weapon which is not imbued with special power, can become a special weapon if wielded by a hero. The sword that Beowulf uses to slay Grendel’s mother did not have special powers, other than that it was so enormous that only Beowulf and giants could wield it. It is because of the hero Beowulf that it becomes special once again. While we consider a lightsaber to be a special weapon, seeing as it does not exist in our universe, in the *Star Wars* universe it is considered an honourable yet common weapon, seeing as at one point there were about 10,000 Jedi. What makes a lightsaber special is the Jedi who wields it, because it binds itself to the Jedi and gains its colour according to the Jedi’s most noticeable trait. The same can be said for Robin Hood’s

bow and arrow: the weapon itself is common, yet it is through the skill of Robin Hood that it becomes a special weapon. The hero who wields it heightens the speciality of these weapons.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of (special) weapons has existed in literature for centuries and this has continued into the world of filmmaking. In almost every Marvel movie that has come out since 2008, there has been a weapon that makes the hero special or a hero that makes a weapon special, such as Mjolnir and Captain America's shield. Grindley (2004) notes that "...a hero's weapon derives its importance from the hero, not the reverse". While this is certainly the case for some weapons, such as Robin Hood's bow, this study has also shown that heroes need weapons in order to achieve a heroic status. Without his hammer Mjolnir, Thor was a mortal man without any special powers. It was only when he redeemed himself and had shown the qualities of a true hero that he regained his heroic status and was worthy to wield Mjolnir again. This study has also explored heroes that are so powerful that they do not need weapons in order to fight. While Bruce Banner sees the Hulk as a curse and a disease, he does use this other persona to fight the enemies and protect the innocent. Because of the importance some weapons serve in the story and because they are often used as a symbol for what the hero stands for, it is unlikely that the use of weapons in films and literature will see its end in the foreseeable future.



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