

Theme Analysis Research Paper  
“Beowulf”

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The story of *Beowulf* is a tale of honor and heroism which depicts the life of the protagonist Beowulf. Through his journey, Beowulf faces three major conflicts—against Grendel when the monster attacks Heorot, Grendel’s mother when she acts out in revenge for her son, and the Dragon when a thief steals treasure from its lair and begins to wreak havoc on Beowulf’s town—though not much else is known about the Geatland hero. So why is *Beowulf* so popular? *Beowulf* is often referred to as the first important work of literature in English even though written in Old English, and only a single script survived and was almost destroyed by a fire in the year 1731. Analyzing the theme of this poem will reveal what *Beowulf* is about and whether or not Beowulf was a hero of his time.

In the beginning of *Beowulf*, the rise of the Danish nation is presented. The importance of establishing lineage is remarkable when considering the age of the poem itself; however since there is not a definitive starting point, most of it is not necessary when analyzing the story and the poem could have started by mentioning King Hrothgar and the introduction to Heorot instead. According to J.R.R Tolkien, he states that “it has been said of *Beowulf* itself that its weakness lies in placing the unimportant things at the [center] and the important on the outer edges” (245). When Beowulf is introduced into the story, he is known as “the mightiest man on earth, highborn and powerful” (Line 197). Beowulf’s introduction, according to Kathryn Hume, makes the protagonist sound ordinary as if he were just another soldier:

Virtually nothing is given [to] us: a few private thoughts or personal hopes or misgivings; no characterizing features except extraordinary strength. Beowulf does not even have a striking possession used by the author to build our sense of his heroic presence. His helmet has boars on it (l. 1453), but so do those of his

men (l. 303). His corset is Welandes [forged] (l. 455), but except for a later testimonial to its efficacy, nothing is made of that fact. His sword is of so little [importance] that he does not use it in the first two fights and breaks it in the third. (2)

However, one could argue that the unknown author of *Beowulf* was simply trying to make Beowulf sound ordinary and fallible, but since he was already introduced as the mightiest man on earth, one may find it hard not to agree with J.R.R Tolkien's quote on the matter.

When Grendel begins his attack on King Hrothgar's Heorot, Beowulf finds it within himself to take care of this monster alone. H.L. Rogers states that "against Grendel, Beowulf used neither weapons nor armour[sic], he did not fight to gain treasure; he placed no reliance on his companions and needed no help from them, though they were all faithful to him" (341). During his fight, Beowulf proclaims that "when it comes to fighting, I count myself as dangerous any day as Grendel" (Line 675). This statement implies that Beowulf does not fear death, and his lack of wielding armor or weapons must mean that he was confident in himself that he would kill this beast without any problems. However, why would Beowulf expose himself to a deadly situation only for honor and respect? As a result, Beowulf appears foolish even though his fight against Grendel was victorious. Once Grendel was defeated, his mother wanted revenge for his death. Beowulf is tasked with protecting the people once more and is promised gold from King Hrothgar once she is dead. Though this time, Beowulf wears full armor, has a sword for protection, and seeks out Grendel's mother's lair to kill her before she can kill any more people. Since Grendel's mother is weaker than her son, why would Beowulf wear full armor this time? During his fight, Beowulf certainly has a more difficult time defeating her and his sword,

Hrunting, is useless against the beast. Fortunately he prevails again and decapitates her; “the Shieldings’ hero hard-pressed and enraged, took a firm hold of the hilt and swung the blade in an arc, a resolute blow that bit deep into her neck-bone and severed it entirely” (Line 1563). After his battle, King Hygelac dies and Beowulf becomes King of the Geats where he rules for fifty years. The author states that “[Beowulf] had been poorly regarded for a long time, was taken by the Geats for less than he was worth: and their lord too had never much esteemed him in the mead-hall” (Line 2183). With his ascendancy to King, the author of *Beowulf* sums up the theme of the story as a climb of social mobility. The third and final conflict Beowulf faces is against the dragon that guarded a treasure and is awoken by a thief when a goblet is stolen. The angry dragon terrorizes Beowulf’s town and destroys the throne-room, Beowulf’s own home. Beowulf begins to prepare for battle against the dragon, though the author states “after many trials, he was destined to face the end of his days, in this mortal world, as was the dragon for all his long leasehold on the treasure” which foreshadows both Beowulf and the dragon’s death (Line 2341). Preceding his battle with the dragon, Beowulf said “I risked my life often when I was young...but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight for the glory of winning...I would rather not use a weapon if I knew another way to grapple with the dragon and make good my boast as I did against Grendel in days gone by” (Line 2511). Though Beowulf would insist on not using weapons or armor, it would certainly be a foolish but prideful death wish on his part. Beowulf’s own soldiers ran away when the dragon appeared. During the battle, Beowulf is fatally wounded by the dragon’s fearsome bite after his sword breaks, though Beowulf and a fellow soldier are able to defeat the dragon in the end. If Beowulf’s soldiers would have assisted him in fighting the dragon, he may have had a much greater chance of survival.

According to H.L. Rogers, he states that “[the author of *Beowulf* believed that] a man should not trust in the things of this world, for they will fail him” (342). This explains Beowulf’s foolish reputation of not using weapons or armor in his battles against Grendel’s mother and the dragon as both of his swords break, and also when his soldiers fail to assist him during his last fight against the dragon which questions their true loyalty to their king. John Halverson states his opinion regarding individualism, heroism, and the death of Beowulf:

The code of loyalty, personal or impersonal, is implicitly and potentially a means toward social unity; it expresses the intent of cooperation. [Loyalty fails] because of individualism. The “cowardice” of the [soldiers] is simply an expression of the priority of the individual over the group. Wiglaf seems dimly to see the dilemma, the glory and the curse of individualism. The [soldiers] were not legally culpable for not coming to Beowulf’s aid; they did only what they were told to do. Yet Wiglaf’s denunciation and his evocation of the loyalty code are right, for the saving of their society requires the cooperative effort that the code contemplates. He also sees the limitations of individual heroism. Beowulf, the greatest of heroes, is loved and revered by [Wiglaf], but the heroic solution is not always the best solution. It is not Beowulf’s pride that brings about the ultimate catastrophe, but precisely his heroism. He is not a victim of ego inflation; he simply cannot see other alternatives to his own way. (608)

Although Beowulf has died, his values and beliefs live on in Wiglaf, and to many, Beowulf was great king and a hero for protecting the people for so long.

The reoccurring theme throughout *Beowulf* is death. The author states that “death is not easily escaped from by anyone: all of us with souls, earth-dwellers and children of men, must make our way to a destination already ordained where the body, after the banqueting, sleeps on its deathbed” (Line 1001). Beowulf knew very well that all men's lives end in death, and knew that his time was up before he fought the dragon. The courage and strength to fight a losing battle is enormous with Beowulf, and that alone makes him heroic.

Works Cited

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