

The Poem “Beowulf” As an Example of the Heroic Medieval Epic

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ABSTRACT

The topicality of the article is “The poem “Beowulf” as an example of the heroic medieval epic” It is one of the most important works of Anglo-Saxon literature, and has been the subject of much scholarly study, theory, speculation and discourse. It tells the story of the hero Beowulf, and his battles against the monster Grendel (and Grendel’s mother), and against an unnamed dragon.

The aim of the given paper is to learn the history of Old English traditions and culture through the heroic poem “Beowulf”.

Introduction. Beowulf is one of the oldest surviving epic poems in what is identifiable as an early form of the English language. In the poem, Beowulf, a hero of the Germanic tribe of Greatland, from southern Sweden, travels to Denmark to help defeat a monster named Grendel. This poem about Danish and Swedish kings and heroes, was preserved in England because the English people are descendants of Germanic tribes: the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. Jutes and northern Saxon tribes came from what is now southern Denmark and northern Germany.

Background and origins of the poem

Beowulf tells a story about the old days of the Anglo-Saxon people in their native land. At the proposed time of the poem's composition (roughly 700 C.E.) the Anglo-Saxons had only migrated to England a few hundred years before; the connection between the Anglo-Saxons, the Danes, and the Geats was still quite strong, and the poem is in some sense an attempt to reconcile the cultures of these different Germanic peoples.

Beowulf, whose authorship is not known and which is the most ancient epic, has a story that, by common consent, is considered to be heroic. Beowulf is the earliest epic in English although the theme of the poem is not English, but Scandinavian. It is believed that the Scandinavian invaders brought the story to England, which was written down at a later date by a Christian cleric. Still, its authorship is shrouded in uncertainty and it was found in Sir Robert Cotton's collection of manuscripts.

The Angles brought the story of Beowulf to England in the 6th century, and there somewhere about 700 A.D., the poem was made into English. This was about seventy years after the death of Mahomet and in the same age as the beginning of the great Tang dynasty in China. Three hundred years later, about the year 1000, the manuscript, which still survives, was written down.

What happened to it for the next seven hundred years is unknown. In 1706, it was recorded as being in Sir Robert Cotton's library. Only twenty-six years later a disastrous fire broke out in the library, but the Beowulf manuscript (MS) narrowly escaped. The charred edges of its leaves can still be seen in the British museum. Two fragments of another poem *Waldere* were found about 1860 in the binding of a book in the Royal Library at Copenhagen.

The hero and setting of Beowulf, the first long poem in English running over 3182 lines, have nothing to do with England. The MS text is divided into a prologue and 43 fits. Though the Angles brought the story to England, it is not even about the Angles but about the Scandinavians. The German tribes, though they fought with each other, and with any one else within reach, had a 'free trade' in stories. Their poets, at least, believed in 'Germania', the single German people. So it is that the first English poem is a Scandinavian story, brought over by the Angles, and made into a poem in England.

The story summarily runs like this: Beowulf, with some valiant Geats, comes to the help of Hrothgar, king of the Danes, whose palace of Heorot is ravaged by the nightly attacks of Grendel, a sea monster of the race of *eotons*, or giant ogres, the issue of Cain. Every night Grendel emerges from his lair in the marshes beneath the cliffs, in order to seize and devour one of the king's companions. In a terrible hand-to-hand struggle, Beowulf tears off an arm of this monster who is mortally wounded and then flees to his den to die. The victory and deliverance is celebrated amidst song, feast and dance. But Grendel's mother tries to avenge the death of her son. She renews the attacks on Heorot, and Beowulf resolves to go forth to fight her in her home.

Diving after her into the waters of a baleful lake, he meets her in a combat in the cave in which she dwells beneath the waters. When Beowulf is all but worsted, he seizes a magic sword which hangs on the wall, and plunges it in the body of the fearful beast, and then, when the Danes fear the worst he returns to Heorot in triumph, bearing Grendel's gigantic head severed from his torso.

In course of time, Beowulf becomes the king of the Geats and reigns over them gloriously for 50 years. But some jewels are stolen from an ancient treasure guarded by a dragon who furiously attacks the king's realm, burning with his flaming and pestilential breath all that lies in his path. Beowulf slays the dragon and saves his people, but he is himself mortally wounded during the encounter by the monster's venomous tooth, and he dies nobly, consoled by the thought that he is bequeathing to them the incomparable treasure which has been in the dragon's treasury. He is, however forsaken during the fight by all his thanes who flee to the nearest wood out of fear but one, Wiglaf, and great evils are prophesied for the Geats now bereft of their valiant king. Beowulf has an epic canvas, almost as vast as the traditional epics of Homer. It is also a primary epic like Homer's the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Beowulf is the general criteria of an epic poem.

First of all, Beowulf, the eponymous hero is a hero in the true sense of the term, and the poem tells the story of his heroic exploits against the sea-monster Grendel, and his mother. The poem also upholds him as a saviour of the Geats. Although he is killed at the end, his is a heroic life, and he is a man who caring little for his old age bravely dares Grendel's mother. He succumbs to the injuries left on his person by the fire-spitting dragon, but his death, though sadly mourned by his men, is a portrayal of the ennoblement of human valour.

Secondly, the setting is also quite large encompassing the sea and land, and the time spans over a period of fifty years or so.

Thirdly, the action involves superhuman battles, Beowulf fighting out the sea-monster Grendel and saving the overseas nation of the Danes. The adventure of Beowulf also accommodates a perilous journey as we see in the *Odyssey* as Beowulf crosses the turbulent sea in a country boat only with thirty comrades.

Fourthly, although gods and superhuman characters, called the **machinery** in the neo-classical age, is absent, the confrontation between Beowulf and the demons is enough to spread out the canvas beyond the terrestrial limit, then conceived.

Lastly comes the question of style, which ought to be sonorous and dignified in keeping with the heroic theme. “The literary method,” says Compton-Rickett,” is massive and sweeping, rather than subtle and varied.

Literary analysis of Beowulf poem

The poem begins with a history of the Danish kings, starting with Shild (whose funeral is described in the Prologue) and leading up to the reign of the current king Hrothgar, Shild’s great-grandson. Hrothgar is well loved by his people and successful in war. He builds a lavish hall, called Herot (or Heorot), to house his vast army, and when the hall is finished the Danish soldiers gather under its roof to celebrate.

However, provoked by the singing and carousing of Hrothgar’s followers, Grendel, **a monster in human shape** who lives at the bottom of a nearby swamp, appears at the hall late one night and kills thirty of the warriors in their sleep. For the next twelve years the fear of Grendel’s potential fury casts a shadow over the lives of the Danes. Hrothgar and his advisers can think of nothing to appease the monster’s anger.

Beowulf, **prince of the Geats**, hears about Hrothgar’s troubles, and gathers fourteen of his bravest warriors, and sets sail from his home in southern Sweden. The Geats are greeted by the members of Hrothgar’s court, and Beowulf boasts to the king of his previous successes as a warrior, particularly his success in fighting sea monsters. Hrothgar welcomes the arrival of the Geats, hoping that Beowulf will live up to his reputation. During the banquet that follows Beowulf’s arrival, Unferth, a Danish soldier, voices his doubts about Beowulf’s past accomplishments, and Beowulf, in turn, accuses Unferth of killing his brothers.

CONCLUSION

Beowulf is a wonderful epic poem and one of the best pieces of literature in the English language. The poem is in the language of the Saxons, in Old English language. The poem is famous for its Scandinavian hero and his bravery acts. The adventures of the hero are the primary focus of the poem. The historical elements of the poem make it is a great epic. The heroism of the main character, the fight of good and bad, the differing beliefs, the introduction of paganism and Christianity; the mix of all these factors makes the poem a great epic.

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