

## Beowulf's Character: Christian Hero or Precautionary Pagan

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As Harlan Ellison asserts, “History will decide if I’m a villain or a hero.” Most likely copied in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, the mighty tale of *Beowulf* follows a majestic warrior and supposed hero. Throughout the proceeding centuries, critics have debated Beowulf’s character—Christian, Pagan, or both—considering the larger social and historical context of the time in comparison to the modern era. For example, Peter F. Fisher discussed in “The Trials of the Epic Hero in Beowulf” that the warrior experienced a heavenly resurrection at the end of the poem—his final judgment day. Richard J. Schrader, on the other hand, in “Succession and Glory in ‘Beowulf’” proposed that the poem is fully immersed in Paganism, even though Christian language appears as it was inserted during the historical shift to Christianity. However, Schrader fails to recognize the role precaution plays within the poem and the advisement to adopt a Christian morality rather than Pagan materialism. While Mary C. Wilson Tietjen contended in “God, Fate, and the Hero of Beowulf” that Beowulf embodies both Christian and Pagan ideals, she ceased to consider his creeping consumption into the materialistic culture which surrounded him that ultimately leads him down an all-encompassing Pagan path. I argue, then, that Beowulf does not appear to align with the predominant Christian ideology and rather, nearing the end, fully embodies Paganism—an emphasis on worldly desires—encouraging the reader to adopt a Christian philosophy through his destructive demonstration of a Pagan lifestyle.

Considering the countering Christian construction of Beowulf’s character, in the beginning of the epic tale, he completed many courageous acts seemingly out of the goodness of his heart and for the protection of his people, exhibiting his heroism and potential Christian

virtue. Upon arrival to Heorot, he is set up to be the greatest and most gracious warrior of all, seeking to defeat Grendel out of the goodness of his heart—a Christian ideal—rather than accruing wealth—as Paganism pervades. Before his arrival, he is described by the narrator, “There was no one else like him alive. / In this day, he was the mightiest man on earth” (4). The narrator ultimately sets the stage to praise and admire Beowulf’s genuine greatness. Within Beowulf’s own introduction, he asserts his virtuous intentions, “We come in good faith to find your lord / And nation’s shield” (5). Thus, he instates his loyalty to Hrothgar and undoubtedly vows his commitment to kill the beast, Grendel. Even though Beowulf makes this profound commitment, it is not to obtain more treasure, but rather to bring peace to Hrothgar and the community in need. Beowulf reassures, “I come to proffer / My wholehearted help and counsel... I can calm the turmoil and terror in his mind” (5). Ultimately, Beowulf exudes empathy towards Hrothgar and graciously offers his “awesome strength” to cast out Grendel, the bringer of tremendous destruction and grief, exemplifying his honorable and arguably holy nobility.

However, Norma Kroll in “*Beowulf: The Hero as Keeper of Human Polity*” points out that Beowulf’s noble acts of goodness are directed towards his people rather than the Divine God, propelling the argument for his Pagan portrayal. “Beowulf is heroic not because, like Abel, he acts rightly toward God but because, unlike Cain, he acts rightly toward men” (121). Kroll’s assertions direct my argument further by demonstrating Beowulf’s innate dynamics managing human politics rather than acting out the Divine prophecy. As told in the tale, Grendel—a depicted monster—is a descendent of Cain, who correspondingly symbolizes monstrous sin. Kroll, then, attests that “Beowulf proves a counterbalance to Cain-like denial of responsibility for his brother by becoming his brothers’ keeper, an essentially political role” (121). Therefore,

according to Kroll, Beowulf is depicted as a hero of civility, nobility, and political order maintaining a central and heroic role throughout the poem; however, I propose that the poem itself critiques his heroic duties by emphasizing his earthly eminence over heavenly transcendence.

As William Reynolds posed, Beowulf embodied the Pagan view through his placed emphasis on earthborn effort rather than Divine, transformative results, raising an ambivalence to the reader of his sincere desires of bringing peace, driven by a Christian faith, or gaining more fame and fortune—historically Pagan attributes. Following Beowulf's arrival, his heroism is questioned and criticized by Unferth. During the party Hrothgar throws for Beowulf, which serves as a celebration of his mighty commitment to bestow peace in the mead-hall, Unferth interrupts with a digression provoking the reader to question the warrior's intent. He depicts Beowulf's swimming contest as immature and deliberate to acquire bragging rights and further fame. He questions Beowulf, "Are you the Beowulf who took on Breca / in a swimming match on the open sea, / risking the water just to prove that you could win? / It was sheer vanity made you venture out / On the main deep" (6). Keeping Reynolds' regards in mind, "Beowulf accepts situations as he finds them; he does the best he can, disregarding results and emphasizing effort" (28). Reynolds continues, "But he can go only so far in understanding and dealing with the affairs of the world, for his is the Pagan view—hopeless, limited, yet brave and, within limits, admirable" (28). Thus, with consideration of Reynolds' Pagan approach, Unferth's digression signals Beowulf's clouded objectives to readers as his goal in this childhood conquest illustrates his effort and desire to receive sole stardom.

Even so, Beowulf bravely steps up in a heroic conquest to defeat Grendel with his great, glorious power and is rewarded with exuberant wealth, which entices him to battle Grendel's

mother, showing his true Pagan identity—slowly absorbing into the materialistic culture. As Kroll notes, “[Beowulf] speaks of acquiring and sharing treasure, not of spiritual goals” (120). Turning to the text, Hrothgar pleads to Beowulf asking for his help once more, exaggerating his generous, objectified reward he would grant upon return. “I will compensate you for settling the feud / As I did the last time with lavish wealth, / Coffers of coiled gold, if you come back” (10). Hrothgar’s proposition tempts Beowulf and he, without any questions, commits to yet another ambitious assignment after hearing his recompense. “So arise, my lord, and let us immediately / Set forth on the trail of this troll-dam. I guarantee you: she will not get away” (10). Therefore, Beowulf’s determination shifted from conquering monsters out of the goodness in his heart to returning for his promised materialistic rewards.

Moreover, Mary C. Wilson Tietjen advocates in “God, Fate, and the Hero of Beowulf” that Beowulf embodies both Christian and Pagan ideals defeating such beasts; however, she ceased to consider his constant consumption into the materialistic culture, which led him down a Pagan path. Tietjen argues “Beowulf himself is presented both as the Pagan heroic ideal of the mighty and renowned warrior and as the Christian ideal of the virtuous hero who rightly attributes his special powers, and the deeds arising from those powers, to the grace of God” (161). However, it must be noted that at Beowulf’s last breath, he wanted more than anything to see the treasures that the dragon hoarded, illustrating his corroded philosophy of Paganism—fighting battles for material rewards rather than for the peace and protection of God’s people. Tietjen’s assertions of Beowulf’s Pagan philosophies, then, explains his desire to obtain fame, wealth, and treasure; however, his Christian construction remains questionable. Beowulf’s battles won, including his final fight of the dragon, supposedly should kill off all evil; however, evil is still not conquered as the nearing future is imagined because Beowulf does not believe in

the greater, Godly good. Following the final fight of the beastly dragon, he wants nothing more than to see the treasures he has just won. Beowulf instructs Wiglaf, “I want to examine / That ancient gold, gaze my fill / On those garnered jewels” (16). Within his lingering moments, the reader is exposed to his overwhelming obsession with material items—specifically the dragon’s hoarded treasure. Beowulf continues, “My going will be easier / For having seen the treasure, a less troubled / letting-go / Of the life and lordship I have long maintained” (16). His profound profession of pride and newly prized possessions point to a problematic perception of his supposed Christian character, as Tietjen worked to prove. If he was of Christian character, Beowulf would have confessed his convictions rather than dwell in earthly treasures.

Opposingly, in Kroll’s reading, she infers that such earthly treasure played an integral role in preserving peace and politics among the society in which he lived, though, I find such a role rendered no use once Beowulf passed. Kroll perseveres, “[Beowulf], like Hrothgar, does not imply a desire to be saved but rather a decision to acquire treasure which, if used properly, can serve to maintain political order” (121). Thus, she expressed Beowulf’s desires for treasure may have had a greater depth: to reinforce political order as his heroic duties required. Despite Kroll’s claims, the materialistic, consumer culture clearly seeped into Beowulf’s breath and being. Beowulf felt as though these items represented his long-lived, exuberant life. They did indeed act as souvenirs from each victorious battle; however, when he parted in death, his wealth and garnered treasures neither mattered nor served a purpose.

The once mighty warrior, in his final battle, drew his treasured sword; however, it failed him, illustrating a precautionary theme that fame and materialism are useless when facing death. In Beowulf’s last fight, he tried using his prized sword against the dragon. The narrator explains, “Beowulf was foiled of a glorious victory. The / glittering sword, infallible before that day, /

Failed when he unsheathed it, as it never should / have” (14). Thus, his rewarded treasures he received during his years of battle could not save him or protect him from the greatest threat of all—death. Even so, Beowulf defeated the dragon sacrificing his life in turn to leave his people triumphant with treasure and a prosperous life. As the narrator states, “For the King, / this would be the last of his many labours / and triumphs in the world” (15). Yet no triumph can be traced within the text, but rather doom. In his remaining lines, Beowulf cites, “Fate swept us all away, / sent my whole brave high-born clan / to their final doom. Now I must follow them” (15). As Fisher postulates, such doom may refer to “Doomsday” or the “Last Judgement” where God decides one’s final fate. He proceeds, “Surely, the hero recognized in this, his last battle, the doom...and also the vision of a Last Judgement, the latter making him the heir to a new promise” (181). Fisher’s argument constructs the Christian view that Beowulf came to terms with his fate and recognized God in the end; however, evil is predicted in the future, exposing the sole reliance on worldly possessions denies one of true transcendence.

Turning to John Leyerle in “Beowulf the Hero and the King,” he establishes that Beowulf’s “unrestrained desire” for such worldly possessions and glorious heroic position placed society in detrimental danger, adding to the fear-induced state of the Geat people. Even though the narrator notes Beowulf as a “veteran king,” he did not act out the God-commanding common good. Leyerle disputes, “The hero follows a code that exalts indomitable will and valour in the individual, but society requires a king who acts for the common good, not for his own glory” (89). Thus, Leyerle’s analysis accounts for the insurmountable, dark, and evil future ahead since Beowulf did not follow the prophecy God granted in his kingship to care for all the Geat people. Leyerle continues, “Beowulf’s preeminence as a hero leads to the destruction of the Geats when he becomes king” (89). Such destruction is defined through a digression in the text amidst

Beowulf's lavish funeral. A Geat woman predicts the horrors they will face proceeding his death, overarchingly suggesting absorption in materialism extinguishes the meanings of life—especially derived spiritual meanings—and provokes readers to adopt a Christian philosophy in which Beowulf fails to abide by. Her vision included, “her nation invaded, Enemies on the / rampage, bodies in piles, Slavery and abasement. / Heaven swallowed the smoke” (16). Leyerle explains, “The funeral of Beowulf marks the start of terrible affliction for the Geats; without allies, beset by enemies” (101). Adding on to Leyerles' argument of Beowulf's self-centered affliction, the woman's vision, then, endorses the pursuit of Christian virtue by directing the reader to stay the course of their moral compass, no matter how tempting flashy fame and wealth may be.

Schrader interjects that Beowulf's fame and wealth buried alongside him was cursed, which may be linked to the Geat woman's terrifying image, yet nonetheless Beowulf falls into the temptation, showcasing his persistent desire to accumulate treasure. Schrader explains that the dragon's treasure was “vainly cursed by men of old, was meant to stay there until Doomsday, as was the dragon. In fact the gold is still in the ground, thanks to its burial with Beowulf, as useless to men as ever” (503). Thus, the dragon's hoard, buried with him, symbolizes its worthless value in life after death. As the funeral unfolded, the narrator describes the scene based on material items rather than Christian convictions. The narrator illustrates, “Then coiled gold was loaded on a cart / In great abundance... The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf, / Stacked and decked it until it stood four-square, / Hung with helmets, heavy war-shields / And shining armor” (16). As reiterated in this descriptive funeral passage, materialistic items were of highest value in Anglo-Saxon culture. By displaying such opulent items during the burial, each was intended to embody his mighty bravery and nobility exemplified through battle; however, they

failed to save or protect him from death. Along with the characters, who watched the loads of treasure descend into the ground, the reader ultimately begins to see where an overindulgence in fame and wealth leads to—a static place within the earth’s core rather than an ascended heaven above due to corrupting consumer culture values.

The consumer culture inherently present in *Beowulf* embodies the essence of materialism, seeking lavish wealth and gold treasures, cautioning readers of its transformative, greed-driven effects that can result in death. There’s no denying Beowulf’s bravery and warrior status, but as fate grew nearer, his majestic identity began to fade. Therefore, with Beowulf’s example of a Pagan lifestyle, the reader learns that even the greatest of heroes can become easily absorbed in such a cultural climate of greed. Chasing wealth and reward, like Beowulf, reveals that even the most powerful and mighty of idols can lose touch with their Christian ideals and cave to the corrupt culture in which surrounds them. In addition, it dually cautions the reader to beware of idols like Beowulf and to rather acknowledge the One true idol—God. Schrader extends his argument of Paganism that relying on Beowulf, the representative of Paganism, leaves no hope for humankind and provides no transcendence. He observed, “The hero departs in a boat laden with treasure, but he does not leave much hope behind” (497). Consequently, when death defeats an idol as mighty as Beowulf, the narrator suggests he and his accrued treasures are, “Gold under gravel, gone to earth, / As useless to men now as it ever was” (17). At last, the reader is left with a precaution from reading the tale of *Beowulf*; materialism, on one side, can give great status yet, on the other side, can leave oneself vulnerable with no meaningful protection or spiritual pursuits that are essential to life. By Beowulf’s characterization—demonstrating a life full of destruction and desire—he serves as a precautionary Pagan, which the reader must learn from, to avoid



shallow materialistic motives and attain a true, deep spiritual connection beyond the earthly realm.

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