

Great Mother or Great Monster?

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In 1936, J.R.R. Tolkien published the essay “Beowulf: The Monsters and The Critics,” in which he discusses prominent monsters throughout Beowulf’s story and the meaning of their battles. In the essay, Tolkien neglects two very crucial battles in Beowulf’s story: the battle with Grendel’s mother and the battle with his own ego. Grendel’s mother is mentioned a mere three times in Tolkien’s essay, which completely undermines any meaning she could have to the story. Tolkien is not the only scholar to discount Grendel’s mother, and his arguments largely align with what other scholars of the time argue; however, his omission of Grendel’s mother’s importance highlights the lack of feminist view on Beowulf’s story. Tolkien also neglects discussing Beowulf’s pride and its impact on the story. While his ego never becomes a physical being he must battle, Beowulf certainly has to battle with his egotistical mindset in order to find success. Beowulf’s pride and submersion in Medieval culture ultimately leads to his demise throughout the story because it blinds him from seeing his foe’s as equals, particularly Grendel’s mother. Beowulf’s frustration during the fight with Grendel’s mother highlights the lack of feminist ideology in Medieval culture because the story attempts to frame her as an evil monster rather than a strong woman seeking revenge.

A key moment in Beowulf’s story is when he defeats Grendel’s mother because it solidifies his strength and will to everyone who hears, especially because he was the only one brave enough to enter Grendel’s mother’s keep. Throughout the long battle, Beowulf faces new struggles in battle with Grendel’s mother. The author writes, “So the Shielding’s 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, toppling the doomed / House of her flesh; she fell to the floor” (11). Despite the praise he later gets for the kill, the passage highlights the surge of emotion Beowulf felt in the moment he kills her. Beowulf is not only enraged by the long battle with Grendel’s mother, but he is also embarrassed because of how long it takes to defeat a woman and how difficult the job is, which highlights Medieval culture as a whole. Further, it emphasizes the importance of his ego to himself and just how much he prides himself on his past accomplishments.

At the beginning of *Beowulf*, the reader is made well aware of Beowulf’s ego, which sets up the framework for his future battles. The text states,

“Greetings to Hrothgar. I am Hygelac’s kinsman,
one of his hall-troop. When I was younger, I had
great triumphs. Then news of Grendel,
Hard to ignore, reached me at home:
Sailors brought stories of the plight you suffer
In this legendary hall, how it lies deserted,
Empty and useless once the evening light
Hides itself under heaven’s dome.
So every elder and experienced council man
Among my people supported my resolve
To come here to you, King Hrothgar,
Because all knew of my awesome strength” (5).

The excerpt of what is essentially Beowulf’s resume highlights exactly how much Beowulf prides himself on what he has done. This being the reader's first interaction with

Beowulf sets up the idea that he has a big ego and is very prideful. His pride and ego are seen throughout the poem too. For example, when Beowulf decides not to use weapons against Grendel. His ego and pride are what eventually lead to his feeling of embarrassment while fighting Grendel's mother because he is on the verge of being bested by what he would call a beast.

Beowulf's pride can be attributed to the success he claims, which is his driving force, but Grendel's mother has been brooding for a long time, meaning her driving force is revenge and pent up anger. "Grendel's mother, / Monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs" (9). The quotation highlights that Grendel's mother has faced more than one wrong in her time, which is explained to be what happened to Cain in this translation. Because of the multiple wrongs against her, she has spent years brooding in her underwater dwelling. The pent up anger she has has finally boiled over the edge, which gives her more strength in battle. "But now Grendel's mother had sallied forth on a / savage journey, / Grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge" (9). The quotation shows how her anger was sent over the top, and it somewhat explains to the reader why Grendel's mother reacts the way she does. Not only was her son killed, but her life that we know about was full of hardships and pain.

Grendel's mother's reputation has caused all of the men to fear entering her underwater lair. The lair is described in a way that makes all other troops fearful of disturbing Grendel's mother. The text states,

"And the mere bottom
Has never been sounded by the sons of men.
On its bank, the heather-stepper halts:
The hart in flight from pursuing hounds

Will turn to face them with firm-set horns
And die in the wood rather than dive
Beneath its surface. That is no good place.
When the wind blows up and stormy weather
Makes clouds scud and the skies weep,
Out of its depths a dirty surge
Is pitched towards the heavens.”

The excerpt explains why the men fled and left Beowulf alone to deal with the problem. Beowulf is the only soldier brave enough to jump into the battle once again highlighting Beowulf's pride. A significant component to this passage is that they are fearful of the environment, not of Grendel's mother. Their lack of fear towards the woman highlights the lack of feminist views in Medieval culture because they are not intimidated by another being that will likely be fighting them. They are more fearful of the unstable environment that, at least from an outsider's perspective, have a better chance at fending off. The disregard of Grendel's mother due to pride is the ultimate mistake to be made considering the battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother is intense and difficult to win for Beowulf.

In Gwendolyn Morgan's essay "Mothers, Monsters, Maturation: Female Evil in Beowulf," Morgan highlights the feminine forces Beowulf encounters are always the ones to give him the strongest fight. Morgan writes, "Maturation requires that her singular control be overcome and her qualities eventually synthesized with the (male) rational consciousness. The obvious parallels in symbolism and function allow us to equate Grendel's dam to the negative aspect of the Feminine; in doing so, we come to understand Beowulf's battle with the ogress beneath the mere and his rising again to the light of day as an allegory of male maturation, a

struggle against the stifling power of the Great Mother” (Morgan 55). She argues that the ultimate “Great Mother” is nature and the earthly elements. The connection created between the natural world and Grendel’s mother highlights strong feminine forces keeping the masculine in check; however, the men that are fearful of the environment do not associate the natural world with femininity, so they use it to perpetuate their idea that Grendel’s mother is nothing but an evil monster that lurks in a dangerous dwelling. The fact that the feminine forces are either overlooked or regarded in a masculine context highlights the lack of feminist ideology that existed in Beowulf’s era as well as the lack of feminist readings of *Beowulf*.

Throughout *Beowulf*, no opponent Beowulf faces puts up as strong of a fight as Grendel’s mother. After enduring a long battle, the text states, “So she pounced upon him and pulled out / A broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge / Her only child” (11). The quotation shows that after a long, tiring battle, Grendel’s mother is still capable and willing to finish the battle for her lost son. The fact that she gets back up and pounces on Beowulf is shocking and new at the same time. These new actions alarm Beowulf and trigger his embarrassment because he is being bested by a being he has deemed as lesser than himself. He finally sees her as a fairly equal foe, which is highlighted in the text,

“Then he saw a blade that boded well,
A sword in her armoury, and ancient heirloom
From the days of giants, and ideal weapon,
One that any warrior would envy,
But so huge and heavy of itself
Only Beowulf could wield it in a battle” (11).

The passage highlights a similarity between the two characters: weaponry. Grendel's mother is not some far off mythical monster, but a reality for many strong women.

Grendel's mother is a prime example of feminine strength and highlights the cultural standing women had in this period. Maria Dahvana Headley has crafted an interpretation of Grendel's mother that highlights the culture surrounding women at this time. Headley argues that Grendel's mother is more human than originally thought. Headley writes, "Grendel's mother, my original impetus for involvement with this text, is almost always depicted in translation as an obvious monster rather than as a human woman— and her monstrosity doesn't typically allow even for partial humanity, though the poem itself shows us that she lives in a hall, uses weapons, is trained in combat, and follows blood-feud rules" (44). Headley highlights the fact that Grendel's mother can easily be seen as human or monstrous, but she furthers her argument by saying social standards are influencing readers' opinions. She writes, "My own experiences as a woman tells me it's very possible to be mistaken for monstrous when one is only doing what men do: providing for and defending oneself" (48). The social expectations for a woman have improved through the years, but *Beowulf's* depiction of Grendel's mother highlights how much worse it could be for women in that era. These Medieval expectations greatly contribute to Beowulf's embarrassment during their fight because he would have been led to believe in his early years that women are less than, and a woman becoming equal to or potentially better than him would have deeply impacted his pride and ego.

In Martin Puhvel's essay "The Might of Grendel's Mother," he cites work from E. Lehmann which argues that Grendel's mother is different from any other character in folktales despite some scholars attempting to find similarities, which proves just how pivotal Grendel's mother is as a character. Puhvel writes, "Lehmann views the roles of Grendel and his mother as

reflecting a transitional stage, embodying the concept of duality, within the process of development in question, a stage marked by lack of uniformity in the relative attribution of powers to demons along lines of sex” (Puhvel 84). Grendel’s mother should not be overlooked and discarded. She is fierce within the story as well as in the literary canon as a whole. Her vast differences from other female characters in the literary canon of the era highlights the importance of a feminist interpretation of the character simply because she exhibits a strength unlike any counterpart. Further, the idea demonstrates the lack of feminism in Medieval culture, which would have impacted Beowulf’s ego within society and his expectations for women.

Beowulf’s pride can be considered his downfall throughout the story. Not only could it have led to his death, but also, his ability to recognize the pure strength and rage of Grendel’s mother. Beowulf relies on his pride to secure his successes, but a true challenger emerges from Grendel’s mother. In the end, Beowulf still relies on his strength, but he has now seen a rage unlike ever before, which prepared him for future endeavors. Grendel’s mother remains largely discredited in most translations. She is never even given a name, which further demonstrates how discredited she is in the story. Grendel’s mother is the only major female character, and she doesn’t have a name. Grendel’s mother may have been completely disregarded by Tolkein, but she is still the “formidable noblewoman” Headley describes, considering she is the only foe that truly gives Beowulf a run for his money during their battle.

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