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A Closer Look at Anglo-Saxon Masterpiece *Beowulf*: A Timeless Tale of Heroism and Mortality

By

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Abstract

In the realm of ancient World Literature, few works have captivated readers, like the legendary iconic English epic poem *Beowulf*, composed anonymously in the 8th or 9th century. The study selects this masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon literature, *Beowulf*. A treasure trove of literary excellence, which has stood the test of time, enthralling audiences for centuries. The study examines its boasting plethora of epic features, richly woven tale of heroism, supernatural elements, as well as exploration of timeless universal themes, vivid imagery and epic scope. At this core, *Beowulf* tells the story of a heroic warrior who battles three formidable monsters: Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon. Through Beowulf's triumphs and ultimate demise, the study explores fundamental human concerns: the nature of heroism, the struggle between good and evil, and the inevitability of death. Hence the researcher did a critical analysis of the work using primary and secondary sources of data collection. It is in this regards that this study is guided by the theory of Archetypal Criticism. Which according to Northrop Frye; is a literary approach that identifies those mystic elements that give a literary work deeper meaning (112). However, the study findings shows that Beowulf's influence extends far beyond its original audience, shaping literature, art, and popular culture. The study concludes that the poem's historical content and cultural context add depth and richness to its narrative. Composed during a time of great social and political upheaval, Beowulf reflects the values, beliefs, and anxieties of Anglo-Saxon culture. The study therefore recommends kinship, loyalty and honour, speaks to the importance of social bonds in a tumultuous world.

Keywords: Beowulf, Epic, Poem, Heroism, Mortality, Legendary

Introduction

Beowulf is one of the oldest existing poems in the English language, but because it is written in Old English (Anglo-Saxon), most of us are unable to read it without a translation. Fortunately, however, there are many good translations which give us an opportunity to read this

colourful, heroic poem of England's epic age. Beowulf, the iconic epic poem, has captivated readers for centuries with its richly woven tale of heroism, monsters, and mortality. Composed anonymously in the 8th or 9th century, this masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon literature continues to enthrall audience with its timeless themes, vivid imagery, and epic scope.

The poem is set in Scandinavia and follows Beowulf's battles against three against three monsters: Grendel, a demon terrorizes the kingdom of the Danes, Grendel's mother who seeks revenge for her son's death and a dragon that threatens Beowulf's own kingdom. Beowulf's victories make him a legendary hero, but he untimely dies in the final battle against the dragon. Through Beowulf's triumphs and ultimate demise, the poem explores fundamental human concerns: the nature of heroism, the struggle between good and evil, and the inevitability of death. One of the defining features of Beowulf is its use of elevated language which imbues the narrative with a sense of grandeur and majesty. The poem's formal, poetic style, characterized by alliteration, caesura and kennings, creates a musical quality that enhances the epic's emotional impact.

The poem's exploration of heroism is multifaceted, presenting Beowulf a complex figure who embodies both the virtues and flaws of human nature. His bravery, strength and loyalty are tempered by his pride, hubris, and ultimately, his mortality. This nuanced portrayal of heroism invites readers to reflect on the human condition and the true meaning of courage. Beowulf's monsters serve as symbolic foils to the hero, representing the forces of chaos, darkness, and destruction that threaten human society. Grendel, the demonic troll, embodies the destructive power of evil, while the dragon represents the devastating consequences of unchecked greed and pride.

However, when critics first began to study *Beowulf*, they were primarily concerned with the historical elements of the poem, and they neglected the basic value of the poem as an extraordinary piece of literature. There are, of course, historical references in the text—for example, King Hygeia's death during his war against the Franks (c. 520 A.D.), recorded by Saint Gregory of Tours in his *Historia Francorum*, but such historical references are not the most important elements in the poem.

Christian influences and biblical references are also critical to a serious understanding of the poem and have drawn considerable attention from scholars. Because these elements are combined with early folktales and heroic legends of the Germanic tribes who immigrated to

England, early *Beowulf* scholars began to investigate whether or not Christian and biblical references were added later to an originally pagan poem. Since the 1939 Sutton Hoo discovery of a seventh century ship, in which both Christian and pagan artefacts were discovered alongside one another in the burial barrow, we know that paganism did exist alongside Christianity during the approximate era in which *Beowulf* was composed. The Sutton Hoo discovery also indicates a high level of creativity during that time, as well as a genuine appreciation for works of art.

The late British critic J.R.R. Tolkien was one of the first modern critics to view *Beowulf* as a unified work of art with all of its elements in harmony, and most critics today recognize the *Beowulf* poet's extraordinary ability to combine several unlikely, disparate elements in order to create a unified work of art.

Conceptual Review

Epic Poetry: Epic poetry is a genre of poetry that tells a heroic story, often with a central character and a narrative that explores themes of courage, honor, and the human condition. Here are some key characteristics of epic poetry

Epic Hero: An Epic Hero is a legendary figure in literature and mythology, typically possessing extraordinary qualities and achieving remarkable feats. Here are some key definitions and characteristics:

Super-Human: Super-Human refers to individuals who possess extraordinary abilities, powers, or qualities that surpass those of ordinary humans. These abilities can be physical, mental, or spiritual, and are often depicted in fiction, mythology, and popular culture.

Mortality: Mortality refers to the state of being mortal, subject to death, and having a limited lifespan. It is a fundamental aspect of human existence, shaping our experiences, beliefs, and cultures.

Supernatural: *The Chambers Papers Back Dictionary*, also defined supernaturalism as not happening in the ordinary course of nature, miraculous. It is seen as the soul, a being without a body, a ghost, an evil spirit, it is the belief that living people can communicate with souls of dead people (512). *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines supernatural as of or relating to existence outside the natural world, it is attributed to a power that seems to violate or go beyond natural forces or relating to a deity, it is relating to the immediate exercise of divine power; miraculous, or relating to the miraculous.

According to *Encyclopedia Eritannica Vol. II*, Supernaturalism is defined as a belief in another worldly realm or reality that, in one way or another is commonly associated with all forms of religion. It is also seen as an evidence of neither the idea of nature nor the experience of a purely natural realm which is found among primitive people, who inhabit a wonderful world, charged with the sacred power (or mana), spirits and deities (400).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is Archetypal Criticism. This is derived from the Swiss Psychologist Carl Jung's *Theory of the Collective Unconscious*. According to Northrop Frye, Archetypal criticism;

is a literary approach that identifies those mystic elements that give a literary work deeper meaning. Archetypal features help in understanding the text and in defining its form and function. These features also demonstrate that the meaning of a text does not reside only on the page nor can it be interpreted only as an independent entity (112).

Jung's theory of the collective unconscious provides the impetus for exploring archetypes represented in literary works. As Echezona Ifejirika says, in literature, an archetype is a typical character, an action or a situation that seems to represent such universal patterns of human nature. They are unknowable basic forms personified or concretised in recurring images, symbols or patterns which may include motifs such as the quest or the heavenly ascent, recognisable character types such as the tricksters (62). We have such archetypes predominantly in the reoccurrence of tortoise stories and his usual tricks and their consequences. These are often predominant in most Igbo literary creations and the hero/heroine, which stand for transformation and redemption in the literary world. Symbols such as the apple or snake (serpent) or images such as water colours (red, blue, green, etc), all have one significant meaning or the other when applied to a particular work of art.

Frye further says that many literary critics are of the opinion that archetypes, which have a common and recurring representation in a particular human culture or entire human race, shape the structure and functions of any literary work. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, argued that the root of an archetype is in the collective unconscious of mankind which is made up of the Id, Ego and the Super Ego. The phrase collective unconscious refers to experiences shared by a race or culture. This includes the people's traditions, customs, religion, myths, death, birth, life, love, hatred, evil, good; light, belief system, struggle, survival, etc. These experiences exist in the subconscious of every individual and are recreated.

A scholar Maud Bodkin, popularised the phrase Archetypal Criticism in his book entitled: *Archetypal Pattern in Poetry* (1934). According to him, Archetypal criticism is applied to narrative designs, character-types or images which are said to be identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature as well as myths, dreams, or even ritualized modes of social behaviours. Common features in Archetypal are held to reflect a set of universal primitive and elemental patterns, whose effective embodiment in creative work evokes profound response from the reader. Apart from Maud Bodkins, other notable practitioners of Archetypal criticism include: G. Wilson Knight, Robert Graves, Philip Wheelwright, Richard Chase and Joseph Campbell.

In addition to the aforementioned proponent of Archetypal criticism is Northrop Frye, who developed in his book: *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), an Archetypal critical approach which he combined with what he called typological interpretations of Bible. As H.M Abrams puts it:

All these critics (Archetypal critics) tends to emphasize the underlying mythical patterns in literature, on the assumption that myths are closer to the elemental Archetype than the artful products of sophisticated writers (11).

Archetypal critics search for intellectual enlightenment or spiritual inspiration in a work of literature. A substantial dosage of ancient myths, legends, ritual and the presence of the gods and goddesses, ghost, spirits, ancients, powers, forces, deities, ancestral powers and references to primordial images and character types is being referred to.

Content and Context of *Beowulf*

Understanding the content and context of *Beowulf* provides a rich and nuanced appreciation of this epic poem, its deans and it's significant in literary history.

Content; *Beowulf* is an old English epic poem that tells the story of an epic warrior named Beowulf. The poem is divided into three main section; Battles with Grendel and Greendel mother: Beowulf travels to Denmark a month and after terrorizing the kingdom. He then battles Grendels mother in revenge for her son's death. Return to Gitland and reign: Beowulf returned to his kingdom Gitland and becomes king .He rules for many years but his final battle is against a dragon that threatens his kingdom. Final battle and death: Beowulf dies in the battle against the dragon but not without killing it, the poem ends with his funeral and the mourning of his people.

Context: *Beowulf* has written anonymously in the 8th and 9th century during Anglo Saxon period in England .The poem reflects the culture ,values ,and the beliefs of that time ,including:

Paganism: The poem shows the influence of Germanic paganism which it emphasizes on fate, destiny, and struggle between good and evil. *Beowulf* reflects the values of anglo-saxon culture such as bravery, honour and loyalty. Christian influence: Although the writer is pagan in origin, it shows some Christian influence with references to God and the Bible. Historical setting :The poem

is set in Scandinavia, the time of great upheaval and migration. Literary tradition : Beowulf is part of epic literary tradition, drawing on earlier works such as the Iliad and the Odyssey.

Epic Features That Define *Beowulf*

Beowulf, the iconic Old English poem is a treasure trove of literary excellence boasting a plethora of epic features that have captivated for centuries. This article delves into the key elements that make *Beowulf* an exemplary epic poem, exploring its epic features that define the poem, which include;

Heroic protagonist: Beowulf is a courageous and powerful warrior who embodies the values of Anglo-Saxon culture. Beowulf, the eponymous hero, embodies the quintessential epic protagonist: his bravery, strength, and unwavering dedication to justice make him a paragon of virtue. As a heroic warrior, his actions drive the plot forward, exemplifying the epic tradition of celebrating exceptional individuals who shape the course of history.

Supernatural elements: The features of monsters, dragons, and magical creatures add to its epic scope. The poem's incorporation of supernatural entities, such as Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon, adds a layer of depth and complexity to the narrative. These creatures serve as foils to Beowulf's heroism, representing the forces of chaos and destruction that threaten human society. The supernatural elements also underscore the epic exploration of the unknown, the mysterious, and the divine.

Quest narrative: Beowulf's battles against the monsters drive the plot forward, creating a sense of journey and purpose. Elevated Language: the poem uses formal poetic language which adds to its epic grandeur. Themes of honor, loyalty, and maternity: *Beowulf* explores universal themes that are characteristics of epic poetry. Action, Adventure, and suspense: The poem is filled with intense battles, dramatic moments, and suspenseful scenes.

Historical and cultural context: *Beowulf* provides insights into Anglo-Saxon culture, history, and values. Symbolism and metaphor: the poem uses monsters and dragons to symbolize human struggles and moral conflicts. These epic features made *Beowulf* a masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon literature and a classic of world literature.

Beowulf explores a range of universal themes, including the human condition of mortality, vulnerability and search for meaning. Heroism: courage, honour and complexities of heroism. Morality: right vs wrong. Justice and the nature of evil Identity: Cultural heritage, kinship, and individual place in society. These themes, timeless and profound continue to resonate with readers today, solidifying Beowulf status as a masterpiece of world's literature.

However, *Beowulf* was usually regarded as an epic until J.R.R. Tolkien, an astute scholar and author of the Hobbit books, declared that the poem was a "heroicelegaic poem." While not all scholars agree with Tolkien, many agree with him in varying degrees. For example, nearly everyone agrees that *Beowulf* is an adventure — but not all adventures are epics. To study the problem, it is necessary to know (1) the characteristics of an epic; (2) Know what a heroicelegaic poem is; (3) What is meant by a lay, and (3) study the qualities of a hero in these different types of poems. After all, it is the hero who determines the direction that the poem will take. *Beowulf's* character, a heroic protagonist, embodies the ideal Anglo-Saxon hero, exhibiting courage, strength, loyalty, and wisdom.

Tolkien bases his premise for calling *Beowulf* a heroicelegaic poem on the idea that the poet takes a hero who is larger than life and uses folktales, legends, and other episodes, possibly historical, to bring out the heroic qualities of the hero. He also tells us that the poem is not a narrative poem because it does not tell a tale sequentially. He further argues that *Beowulf* is not a romantic tale, nor is it a lay. Tolkien chooses to call *Beowulf* a heroicelegaic because the first part of the poem, which is heroic, builds up to the second part, which ends in tragedy. Without a background of Beowulf's earlier heroic deeds, the last part would be meaningless.

Other critics point out that *Beowulf* is not a lay since a heroic lay focuses on only one episode of a well-known story from the past. In addition, the three pivotal epic battles showcase Beowulf's prowess and valour, cementing his status as a legendary warrior. The lay moves more swiftly to its conclusion, and the main interest is on the heroic deeds of men who "act out their fates" in accordance with their concepts of justice — no matter what the consequences may be. The lay is meant to bring the audience to emulate the courage of the hero. Both the epic and the lay tell stories of great heroes, but there are significant differences. The epic moves at a more

leisurely pace and amplifies the stories which the poet incorporated from older lays. In contrast to *Beowulf*, "The Fight at Finnsburg" is a lay and tells the story of a five-day battle in fifteen lines. The *Beowulf* poet takes eighty lines to describe Beowulf's battle with Grendel, which lasts only a few minutes.

Regardless of Tolkien's views, *Beowulf* clearly contains many epic characteristics. For example, the *Beowulf* poet describes (in two of many relative clauses in the poem) a coat of mail "that knew how to defend the bone cage," and a coat of mail that protects the hero "so that no attack could injure his vital parts." The appositive is also characteristic of the epic style; Note such phrases as "the war shirt woven by hands, broad and expertly wrought, was soon to explore the waves." Other types of diction are also typical of the epic style: (1) metaphors such as the "swan-road," "wielder of glory," "shafts of slaughter," and "cage of bones"; And (2) compounds words such as "battlesweat" (meaning *blood*), "breastclothing," "battle clothing," or "battle byrnie." The epic poet also makes use of kennings, figurative phrases used as synonyms, and litotes, or understatements. These figures of speech are, of course, also found in other AngloSaxon poetry. The language of the epic style is, therefore, an elevated language, a rather formal language. Nearly all epics also use set forms, or set pieces, which are cues for the scop's memory. The AngloSaxon poets used these cues to insert stories of historical heroes into the main subject of their story.

In Greek epics, the poet calls upon the Muse to speak through him, but there is no Muse in *Beowulf*. The scop calls upon his memory of stories heard in the past. In *Beowulf*, the poet begins the poem with "We have heard it said," indicating that he relies on well-known tales, or legends. Most epics begin *in media res* (in the middle of things), but this is not the case in *Beowulf*. The poet goes back to the early history of the Scyldings and leads up to Hrothgar's reign. Epic characters hold high positions — kings, princes, noblemen and members of the aristocracy — but the epic hero must be more than that. He must be able to perform outstanding deeds, be greater than the average epic character, and be of heroic proportions. Most of all, he must have superhuman courage.

Epic characters generally deliver numerous speeches, all of which move the action forward, tell something about the past, or reveal the speaker's character traits. Sometimes the hero's

character traits are revealed in speeches by other characters. Beowulf does not give many speeches, but from those he gives, we learn about his character traits. Warriors in epics frequently deliver boasts before attacking an enemy, and we hear Beowulf's boast to Hrothgar that he will rid Heorot of Grendel. His boast includes a mention of earlier heroic deeds, and Beowulf also refers to his reputation as a brave man who has extraordinary strength. Unferth accuses him of being cowardly, but Beowulf's accomplishments prove otherwise. Later, Beowulf boasts before confronting Grendel's mother, but he does not boast before he confronts the dragon. In fact, he says, "I forego boasting".

Genealogy is also important to the epic warrior, for he wants us (and his enemies, as well) to know that he comes from a long line of warriors. Beowulf relates his genealogy to Hrothgar when he introduces himself to the king. Hrothgar, of course, already knows Beowulf's father from Ecgtheow's years of exile in Hrothgar's court.

The taunting of the hero is also a common feature of epics, especially before a battle. Here, the *Beowulf* poet uses the taunt to expose Unferth's unsavory character traits. Unferth manifests his jealousy when he taunts Beowulf about his youthful instability, but Beowulf turns the tables on Unferth and taunts him about his lack of courage. Beowulf reminds Unferth that Grendel would not be ravaging Heorot if Unferth were as brave as he "would have men think." Beowulf also reminds Unferth of his sin against society (killing a kinsman). Interesting, the *Beowulf* poet does not use the taunt device before Beowulf fights Grendel, Grendel's mother, or the dragon, and these are the only three battles we witness in the poem.

The usual setting for an epic is vast — usually encompassing stories about great nations, or even the universe. Although *Beowulf* is about a noble hero and his relationship with two nations, the concept of a "vast scope" is present: Beowulf's enemies are not human. The nonhuman enemies raise the notion of a king's fall to a fall of cosmic dimensions, a struggle with universal evil, the fate of human life and man's efforts. Beowulf's fate rises above time and history.

Supernatural "forces" are usually evident in an epic, but these do not appear in *Beowulf*. There is some reference to the Will of God and His control of Man's Fate (Wyrd), but there is no

direct superhuman force, such as we see in the Homeric epics. The moral or religious code seems less dependent upon superhuman beings than upon social codes. Social codes are moral because, if adhered to, they produce right action and an ordered society.

THE EPIC HERO

The meat of an epic is usually derived from violent and social chaos — a central conflict, often pitting the hero versus an unjust king, or ruler. Traditionally, the hero is brave, of course. He is almost superhuman in strength, successful in battle, and contemptuous of his wounds — even of death. In addition, the hero is of noble stock or, sometimes, he may be even semidivine. Without these qualities, a man would never be recognized as a hero. Yet, within this traditional context, a hero becomes infinitely more interesting as a literary character when he deviates from the usual heroic pattern

One of the characteristics of Beowulf that individualizes him from other early heroes is his extraordinary "quality of loyalty" to his lord, or king. Beowulf is fiercely loyal to his lord and to the lord's family, just as he is to Hrothgar, who is only a "temporary" lord for him. In many epics, a period of turmoil exiles the hero from his homeland, or else he realizes that he can achieve heroic status only if he goes to another kingdom where there is a chaotic, disintegrating breakdown of tribal organization. Beowulf, however, is not an exile from his homeland; He leaves voluntarily with the consent of Hygelac, his lord. All of his heroic and famed exploits are performed in another country before he returns home to eventually become a lord, or king himself.

Beowulf has no responsibility to protect the Danes from Grendel, but Hrothgar, the Danish king, does have just such a responsibility. Some critics view Beowulf's purpose for taking over the duties of Hrothgar as purely personal — to establish his own reputation as a hero. However, other critics view Beowulf's contributions to the Danes as altruistic. When Beowulf arrives at the land of the Scyldings, the coast guard asks him to identify himself and give the details of his visit. Beowulf says that he does not come to challenge Hrothgar's power, but to perform a task for the lord. Resentment is often evident at court — particularly in Unferth, who ridicules Beowulf's early

feats of daring. Unferth also questions Beowulf's ability to accomplish the deed that he has come to perform.

Frequently in an epic, as a foil for the hero, we see a king who is weakened by a flaw. He may be temporarily weakened, or he may be too old to function in a protective capacity for his nation. A king's weakened position often creates chaos, for his society fears his inability to rule adequately. They fear that an outsider might invade and replace the king, thereby imposing foreign ideas on the community. This problem of a weak king exists in *Beowulf*, and had Beowulf been another type of hero, the plot of the poem would have taken another turn. A key to understanding this poem lies in an understanding of how the poet handled the problem of kingship in both the courts of the Danes and the Geats.

Beowulf differs from the usual intruder hero in that he respects the legitimacy of the Danish kingship. He has no intention of usurping Hrothgar's kingship, and he performs in the same honourable manner when he refuses the kingship after Hygeia's death. He accepts the crown only after Hygeia's son is killed in battle.

In conclusion, *Beowulf's* enduring appeal lies in its masterful blend of epic features, which have captivated readers for centuries. The poem is divided into three main sections: Battles with Grendel and Grendel's mother: *Beowulf* travels to Denmark a month and after terrorizing the kingdom. He then battles Grendel's mother in revenge for her son's death. Return to Gitland and reign: *Beowulf* returned to his kingdom Gitland and becomes king. He rules for many years but his final battle is against a dragon that threatens his kingdom. Final, battle and death: *Beowulf* dies in the battle against the dragon but not without killing it, the poem ends with his funeral and the mourning of his people.

This ancient tale of heroism, friendship, and the human condition remains an integral part of our shared literary heritage, inspiring new generations of readers and writers alike. The epic poetry of *Beowulf* remains a testament to the power of literature to captivate, inspire, and provoke. Its exploration of heroism, mortality, and the human condition continues to resonate with readers today in our contemporary society, making it a timeless classic of world literature.

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