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English 246.01

Beowulf: The Great Transformation

Beowulf is the only surviving Old English epic. The word “epic” comes from the Greek word “epos” which, when translated, means “voice”. The story of *Beowulf*, which originated in the 7th century, was originally told orally by scop, traveling poets who sang stories of warriors and heroes from the past. The epic story was not physically written down until the 11th century, by a Christian monk. This plays an extremely important role in the story of *Beowulf* because when the story was originally told in the 7th century, it was a Viking story. Vikings were pagans, who did not believe in God. The monk wanted to teach a Christian lesson throughout the pagan poem. When the Christian monk decided to finally write the epic story down, he made some changes to the text in order to incorporate Christianity. This caused some confusion throughout the text because there is one story being told in two different religions, one that does not believe in a single god, while the other strongly does believe in God. Throughout the three part epic story of *Beowulf*, there is a transformation of Beowulf from an Anglo-Saxon pagan hero, into a Christian hero.

The Christian monk who wrote down the story of Beowulf wrote it in a *tri-partite* structure, meaning “three parts”. Each part of the story represents a battle between Beowulf and a monster. The Christian monk chose three out of Beowulf’s numerous epic battles because the number three is very significant to Christianity because it symbolizes the Trinity. Although Beowulf was originally a pagan Anglo-Saxon hero, the monk made a transition of Beowulf into a Christian hero throughout the story.

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While reading *Beowulf* and composing this written work I had to use multiple different ways of thinking and processing the text. I was making full use of literacy practices, which include the “construction of knowledge, values, attitudes, beliefs and feelings associated with the reading and writing of particular texts within particular contexts”, NCTE Standard 3.2- know oral, visual, written literacy practices. While teaching this work to my students in the future I will have class discussions about their attitudes, values, beliefs, and feelings associated with the book because the story has some graphic, bloody scenes that may make some students feel uncomfortable, as well as scenes that discuss the values and beliefs of different religions. These topics could be discussed within the classroom in large group discussions to ensure all students feel comfortable with the material and events that occur, as well as make them knowledgeable about the beliefs of the time in comparison to modern beliefs of what is considered acceptable and what is not.

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I believe that this writing piece connects to NCTE Standard 2.2- Foster familiarity with student’s own/ others’ cultures because paper discusses Beowulf’s transformation from an Anglo-Saxon pagan hero into a Christian hero. While writing this paper I had to reflect on the two religions and their beliefs and morals. While doing so I began to reflect on my own religion and culture. As a future educator, I could use this as an assignment for my students and incorporate different types of cultures and religions within the lesson. I would encourage students to explore their own cultures, beliefs, morals, etc. and then share them with their peers.

In part one of *Beowulf*, the reader is introduced to the King of the Danes, Hrothgar. Hrothgar built a mead hall, where the king would celebrate, meet, and eat with his warriors and his people. The mead hall, Heorot, had been invaded by a monster named Grendel, who would come in and kill Hrothgar's warriors. When Grendel is first introduced there is an immediate contradiction between the pagan religion and Christianity. We are told, "Grendel was the name of this grim demon haunting the marches, marauding round the heath and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time in misery among the banished monsters, Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel the Eternal Lord had exacted a price..." (36). Grendel is compared to the biblical figure Cain, who killed his brother Abel. The connection between Cain and Grendel is made because in the Anglo-Saxon covenant, Grendel is killing warriors whom he should look at as his brothers. This comparison of Grendel to Cain is an example of where the Christian monk incorporated pieces of Christianity into this Anglo-Saxon, pagan story.

In the Anglo-Saxon culture, when someone killed another human being, the killer would pay a *wergild* to the person's family as compensation. Grendel was breaking the Anglo-Saxon covenant, or law, by refusing to pay the *wergild*, "How he would never parley or make peace with any Dane nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price"(37). Not only is Heorot a symbol of the Anglo-Saxon culture, but it is also a yonic symbol. A yonic symbol is an enclosed space in poetry that connotes a woman's womb. This means that not only is Grendel breaking the Anglo-Saxon covenant by refusing to pay the *wergild*, but he also is symbolically raping Heorot. In order to restore the Anglo-Saxon covenant, Beowulf must defeat Grendel. *Wergild* is a pagan idea, so Beowulf fighting for *wergild* shows that he is a pagan hero. When Beowulf goes to fight Grendel he chooses to fight without any weapons or protective armor: "He has no idea of the arts

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While working through this piece of literature I expressed my knowledge for an extensive range of literature (NCTE Standard 3.5) because the novel was written in Old English, so while reading this work I had to interpret the Old English writing into modern English in order to understand the events occurring throughout. This shows that I have various skills and my range of literature goes beyond just modern English.

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While reading Beowulf I had to learn numerous terms that are no longer used in modern English. By acquiring new language I fostered familiarity with cultures unfamiliar to my own (NCTE standard 2.2).

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Throughout this reading and writing process my knowledge for the English language grew dramatically because I learned new terminology, literary concepts and analysis, and new ways of reading works (ex: anagogically vs allegorically). This text and written work contributed greatly to my personal growth an English major.

of war, of shield or sword-play, although he does possess a wild strength. No weapons, therefore, for either this night: unarmed he shall face me if face me he dares”(47). Beowulf does this because Grendel does not fight with any weapons or armor and he thinks that it will only be fair if he too goes to fight barehanded. This makes Beowulf the perfect pagan, Anglo-Saxon hero. In order to defeat Grendel, Beowulf rips off Grendel’s arm, which symbolizes that Grendel no longer has a grip on the Anglo-Saxons. Ripping off Grendel’s arm also symbolizes paying the *wergild* for all of the men Grendel has killed, and restoring the Anglo-Saxon covenant. In part one of the epic, Beowulf is the perfect pagan, Anglo-Saxon hero.

In part two of the epic poem there is a turning point in the story because Beowulf transforms from a pagan hero into a Christian hero. After Grendel has been defeated by Beowulf he runs back to die in his mother’s cave. The cave is another yonic symbol and represents that Grendel is a *puer aeternus*, or eternal child. This shows that Grendel is the opposite of a hero because he does not fulfill the hero’s quest of growing up and moving from dependent to independent. Grendel’s mother has come to avenge her son’s death because she was not paid the *wergild* after he died. We are told, “Then it became clear, obvious to everyone once the fight was over, that an avenger lurked and was still alive, grimly biding time. Grendel’s mother, monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs”(61). Now Beowulf must defeat Grendel’s mother and fight against *wergild*, which is a pagan rule. This time Beowulf wears a full body suit of armor and brings a sword with him because Grendel’s mother represents the motherly temptation to stay a child. This suggests that the battle with Grendel’s mother is much more serious because of the fear that Beowulf may fall back into being a *puer aeternus*. Beowulf’s armor is gold which symbolizes Christian purity. Beowulf enters the mere, or lake, and swims down into Grendel’s mother’s cave. He defeats the mother figure by cutting her head off, “So the Shieldings’ hero

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NCCTE Standard 2.6- Demonstrate role of arts/ humanities in learning. While teaching Beowulf in the future as an educator I may decide to incorporate different arts and humanities revolving around the time that the story was written. I believe that it would benefit students to see art work and visual displays from the 7th century. An activity to incorporate art into the lesson which could be very effective for students who are visual and kinesthetic learners is to have the students draw their own pictures of Grendel. Because Grendel’s appearance is never fully described, there is room for interpretation and creativity. By allowing students to express their ideas of how they picture Grendel to look facilitates different levels of thinking, separate from writing papers. This project would be extremely beneficial to students who are visual learners and kinesthetic learners because it allows them to do a hands on activity and physically “see” Grendel.

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. The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated”(67). Cutting her head off symbolizes cutting the umbilical cord, which represents Beowulf’s fulfillment of the hero’s quest for independence. After killing Grendel’s mother, Beowulf emerges from the cave, or *womb*, and swims back to the top of the mere with her head. When Beowulf leaves the water it is his symbolic baptism and rebirth as a Christian hero. Beowulf has now transitioned from a pagan Anglo-Saxon hero into a Christian hero.

Many years have passed between part two and part three of the *tri-partite* structure and Beowulf has been ruling as the king of Geatland for fifty years. Beowulf’s final battle arises after a slave awakens a dragon by stealing a golden goblet from the treasure that the dragon is guarding. Beowulf’s fighting of the dragon represents a direct connection to Christianity because in the bible Christ has to defeat a beast, “The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth, whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will wonder when they see the beast, that he was and is not and will come” (Revelation 17:8). In Genesis, the serpent tries to persuade Eve to go to the Tree of Knowledge and eat of its fruit, breaking God’s law. In *Beowulf*, the gold tempts the slave the same way the serpent tempts Eve. The gold and the serpent both represent human temptation to things that they should not have. Another analogical interpretation of the dragon guarding the hoard, or treasure, is that the hoard represents the reward of Heaven and the serpent dragon represents the barrier of sin. Defeating the dragon is symbolic to Beowulf defeating the Anglo-Saxon pagan religion. Beowulf performs an *imitatio-*

christi, meaning he imitates Christ, because just like Christ sacrificed himself for his people, Beowulf also sacrifices himself for others.

This battle with the dragon becomes Beowulf's final battle because the dragon breathes out his fire, a symbol for purification, and ultimately kills Beowulf. In John 19:27-30, while Christ is dying on the cross, his apostle John is the only person who stays with him. Like Christ, Beowulf only has one knight, Wiglaf, with him as he is expiring. This is another example of an *imitatio-christi*. Beowulf's last request is for Wiglaf to bring him some gold because he wants to look at it. We are told, "So he came to the place, carrying the treasure and found his lord bleeding profusely, his life at the end; again he began to swab his body. The beginnings of an utterance broke out from the king's breast-cage. The old lord gazed sadly at the gold" (92). Gold is another representation of purification and Christianity because Christians drink from the gold goblet, or chalice in the Mass. We are able to make the connection that Beowulf may want to look at the gold as he is dying because the gold represents Christianity and Heaven, where he knows he will be going soon.

Throughout the epic poem of *Beowulf* we are able to see a clear transformation of Beowulf, starting out as a pagan Anglo-Saxon hero in part one, and transitioning into a Christian hero in part three. It is evident that the Christian monk who physically wrote down the story of Beowulf had intentions of teaching a lesson of Christianity throughout the story by showing Beowulf's transition. Beowulf starts out fighting for wergild as a pagan hero in part one. In part two there is a turning point when he enters the mere as a pagan hero and exits as a Christian hero through his symbolic baptism and rebirth. In part three of the *tri-partite* structure we see an *imitatio-christi* through Beowulf as he defeats the dragon and dies as a Christian hero. Along with his transformation from a pagan hero to a Christian hero, Beowulf also fulfills a hero's

quest of transitioning from dependent to independent by decapitating Grendel's mother and symbolically cutting the umbilical cord of the mother figure. Beowulf grows throughout the epic poem in multiple ways and in the end becomes immortal. His story has been told for centuries and the story of Beowulf will always remain one of the greatest Old English epic poems.