

THE MAKING OF AN ANGLO-SAXON HERO

by

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## ABSTRACT

Modern literary criticism of Beowulf has raised the poem far above its value as merely an historical document. That the author worked primarily as an artist, and only secondarily as an historian of the Anglo-Saxon pre-migration period, is widely recognized. Nor did he merely retell an older folk-tale about heroes and monsters, although the main events, the three great fights, are arranged chronologically. Rather, the poet has fixed in his mind the ideals of a pre-Christian heroic society, and he designs his poem to reveal these ideals through the character and actions of Beowulf, presented first as a young retainer and then as an old king.

Beowulf comes into the story as he comes into the land of the Danes---as a complete stranger; but in the exchange of speeches it is evident that he is no wandering adventurer seeking personal glory. He has come to help the Danes in their twelve-year feud against Grendel, and he awaits Hrothgar's permission to act as the Danish champion. The first 700 lines of the poem lead up to Hrothgar's entrusting his great hall, the symbol of Danish glory, to Beowulf's protection, and the actual fight is thus only a crowning point, verifying all that has been revealed of Beowulf---his great strength and his equally great courage.

Although there is a leap in the chronological progression of events after Beowulf returns to his Geatish king---we are suddenly told that he became king and has ruled well for fifty years---there is no break in the poet's imaginative progression. Hrothgar had preached to Beowulf the virtues of good kingship, declaring that the young thane has only to use well those gifts which God has given him, and which he has already displayed.

It is with this knowledge of Beowulf's character that we must interpret his last great fight, in which he again reveals the qualities he had shown against the descendants of Cain. His death is given also an historical significance, set as it is between the earlier wars of the Geats and Swedes and the future

wars in which his people expect to be defeated. Beowulf has given the Geats fifty years of peace--- not by overcoming possible enemies, but, we are led to believe, by his character alone. The last 350 lines of the poem concentrate upon the profound sorrow of the Geats in the death of their king: for they realise that their loss is even the loss of their living ideal of heroic conduct and of their own security.

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## Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

However indebted the modern reader is to scholarly works on Beowulf, most of these writings will not have helped him directly if his primary concern has been the study of the poet's imaginative presentation of a heroic figure, expressed through a carefully constructed pattern which reveals not only him, but also his impact upon the society of which he is the ideal. The antiquarian interests of the nineteenth century scholars revolved around such questions as the date of the poem's composition, its historical accuracy, and the stories involved in what they saw as a primitive heroic tale.<sup>1</sup> Although such questions are interesting, they are quite independent of poetic appreciation, and must not be conceived to be necessary for the understanding and enjoyment of the poetry of Beowulf. R.W.Chambers's Beowulf: an Introduction to the Study of the Poem is representative of the state of Beowulf scholarship up to 1921. Besides collating various analogues of the "Bear's Son's Tale", Chambers divides the poem into two kinds of elements, judged for their historical or non-historical content; then he outlines and comments upon various theories of the origin, date and structure of the poem. His primary concern, as indicated in his title, is not the poetry of Beowulf, but rather those studies which are derived from earlier scholarly interest in the



text as history. With this limited perspective he thus summarizes his remarks on the Christian elements:

The great merit of Beowulf as a historic document is that it shows us a picture of a period in which the virtues of the heathen 'Heroic Age' were tempered by the gentleness of the new belief; an age warlike, yet Christian: devout, yet tolerant.<sup>2</sup>

This enlightening observation must indeed be the product of a close reading of the poem, but Chambers says nothing about the artistic presentation of these two moral codes.

J.R.R.Tolkien's British Academy lecture (1936) is often considered to have been the turning-point of Beowulf criticism, in that he emphasized the necessity of dealing with the poem as a work of art, and not merely as a historical document or a museum piece of interest to students of the past. Except in a few details, Tolkien's approach met with little opposition, and moreover it set a new generation of scholars to work on internal evidence, elucidating the artistry of the poem, and evaluating the whole as a work of art. It should be noted that before Tolkien's lecture, few critics dared to maintain that the literary merits of Beowulf called for the study of the poem by all serious students of English literature. But today, if any were to maintain that the poem is unskilled and inartistic, and not at all worthy of the attention of the modern reader, he would necessarily have to deal with hundreds of articles of the last thirty years which focus upon a multitude of minute details, and which claim to demonstrate the high level of artistic competence of the Beowulf poet. In the most comprehensive

study yet of the poem as a work of art, A.G. Brodeur concludes that "Beowulf is the work, not of an illiterate 'singer', but of a great literary artist, dominating, expanding, and transcending the limits of the form in which he elected to compose."<sup>3</sup> Although our ignorance of Anglo-Saxon poetic convention and literary form has led some critics to deny our right to judge the poem as a work of art, Brodeur has demonstrated that through a study of the poem itself, various techniques, whether conventional or original, are seen to be skilfully handled by the poet to suit his artistic purposes. It may be said that true appreciation depends upon the kind of perspective used in viewing the poem---historical, mythical, Christian, pagan: but a modern reader whose primary concern is poetic appreciation will read the poem assuming that the composer is above all an artist. The reader's study of the poem may possibly disappoint him, but he must, at least, approach the poem with an open mind. Admittedly, without the work of those scholars of the past and the so-called "dragon's curse of philology", the modern reader would be faced with insurmountable linguistic difficulties; while a further difficulty to evaluation is, as several critics have shown, that Beowulf is unique in the corpus of Old English poetry in style, plan, and subject, and so "exists for us, in a kind of literary vacuum without historical perspective."<sup>4</sup>

The text of the poem is found in the Nowell Codex of the manuscript designated "Cotton Vitellius A xv" along with two prose pieces, Wonders of the East and Alexander's Letter to Aristotle, a combination probably resulting from their material

in common; that is, monsters. That they were copied from some other manuscript or manuscripts is attested by the two different handwritings of the Nowell Codex, but little more can be ascertained about the transmission of the text. Although the majority of critics do not oppose the 'educated guess' that the poem was composed some time in the second half of the eighth century, the question remains open until more trustworthy evidence is found. Likewise, the character of the poet and his audience may be determined through internal evidence, but nothing certain is known; most scholarship on these points grows out of suggestions and ambiguities, and therefore they must always be reckoned as possibilities rather than as verifiable facts. If the poet is primarily an artist, he will have shaped his subject-matter to suit his purposes, and these purposes will in turn be shaped by literary conventions of the time. But the ordering and establishing of evidence to demonstrate both the character of the poet and his audience and also the purpose of the poem (if this is felt not to be primarily aesthetic) will forever be developed from the poet's own suggestions and ambiguities, and fed by our own subjective emphasis. And for this reason, we find critical points of view on, for example, the pagan-Christian question, ranging from F.A.Blackburn's "The Christian Coloring of The Beowulf" to L.D.Benson's "The Pagan Coloring of Beowulf"; while the audience has been limited to the six or seven suggested by Shelley for his Prometheus Unbound, and has been expanded to include cowherds such as Caedmon who would require divine intervention in order to be able to compose lines like those which the Beowulf poet has

Hrothgar's scop sing in Heorot.

The language barrier separating the modern reader from poetic appreciation of Beowulf can never be completely overcome; but every study, however minute and detailed, attempting to determine the precise shade of meaning of each word in its context is valuable to the reader. F.Klaeber, in his first edition of the poem in 1922, recognized the creative possibilities of the language and the necessity of comparing the use of particular words in other contexts; accordingly, he indicates whether a word is found only in the poem, or in other poems as well, or also in prose. About the same time, H.C.Wyld recognized the main difficulty in our study of Beowulf, that we must understand what emotional effect a word may have had on the Anglo-Saxon audience before we can fully appreciate the poetry. The breadth and depth of all those studies of this kind which have appeared since Tolkien's lecture in 1936 is indeed formidable; but this kind of minute knowledge of the language of Beowulf is acquired with profit and is available through the methods of modern literary criticism. This helps to make the difference between, for example, the study of Yeats and the study of Beowulf, as far as the student of literature is concerned, one of degree, not of kind: that being the degree to which scholarship is necessary for critical analysis and historical understanding. Admittedly, since the literary tradition of the Anglo-Saxons lies half-buried in the so-called 'dark ages' of Western civilization, "the careful undoing of the effects of time" is a more necessary preliminary task for the poetic appreciation of Beowulf. The student of

literature must turn to the non-aesthetic studies of the past primarily because they are necessary for elucidating the poem even as poetry. Since Tolkien's lecture Beowulf has been much praised by those who have used the various aids of philology, linguistics, history and archeology for discovering the poem, and some of these 'scholar-critics' praise the poet as a literary artist on the level of Chaucer, traditionally regarded as the Father of English Literature.

Although early critics often remarked on the repetition of words and phrases, and the vast number of words which could be used to express a given idea (for example, 39 for man), it is becoming increasingly evident that "there are in fact no synonyms in the strict sense of the term in Old English poetry."<sup>5</sup> The differences between beorn, freca and wig are not evident when we gloss them all by the modern English warrior, but to say that the poet used them indiscriminately to signify our concept warrior is an unwarranted assumption rooted in our ignorance of the shades of meaning in the language of a warrior-society.<sup>6</sup> Knowledge of those precise shades of meaning is also essential for a modern reader's appreciation of what Klaeber has called "the most important rhetorical figure, in fact the very soul of the Old English poetical style"<sup>7</sup>, namely, variation. Not only, however, must we recognize the differences of wine Deniga, freca Scyldinga, beoden marne, all signifying Hrothgar [350-353], to realise that they are not mere repetitions of a single concept of kingship, but we must also recognize the differences among, for example, the three versions of Beowulf's

fight with Grendel's mother.

One of the most debated subjects in Beowulf criticism has been that of the structure and unity of the poem, which has developed from the arguments for and against the nineteenth century liedertheorie.<sup>8</sup> Klaeber observed that the poem lacks "steady advance"<sup>9</sup> and that the poet frequently digresses from the main story of the exploits of the hero, thus repeating action already told, referring to other stories of the past and foreshadowing future events, some of which do not occur within the poem. The implication is, of course, that the poem should have a steady advance, a linear movement which characterizes heroic stories of other literatures, and that such a gap in the narrative as Beowulf's fifty-year rule is a serious structural weakness. However, since Tolkien's well-received attempts to explain the structure and unity of the poem as "a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings"<sup>10</sup> which denies us the right to expect a steady advance, several critics have looked much more closely into the problem of structure without such preconceived ideas, and have found a kind of variation similar to that mentioned above regarding lines 350 to 353, but on a larger scale.<sup>11</sup>

The obvious danger in concentrated studies of the diction of Beowulf is that peculiarities of style can easily remain unrelated to the work of art as a whole. The better approach to style is therefore one which aims at establishing "some unifying principle, some general aesthetic aim pervasive of a whole work"<sup>12</sup>; Brodeur finds the pervasive aesthetic aim of the poet to be variation. He compares the aesthetic effect of this device in Beowulf with that in other Anglo-Saxon poems, but in doing so he

finds in the others not "such consciously artistic use of variation". Following the poet's technique, Brodeur's approach is to treat his words "not as items in a glossary, but as the major stuff of the language of poetry"; in other words, "to look behind the word and the word-group to the image, the figure, to discover the poet's imagination at work".<sup>13</sup>

The design of the entire poem, the way in which the various parts fit together, should also be viewed as the product of the poet's imagination. In his Epic and Romance W.P.Ker indicated his displeasure with the structure of the poem, maintaining that the principal actions are "curiously trivial" and that compared with the Nibelung legend, the tale of Finnesburg, and the poem dealing with the Battle of Maldon, it is lacking in weight.<sup>14</sup> Believing that historical events and battles among men are more important than legendary fights with monsters, Ker notes that "the largest of the extant poems of this school has the least important subject-matter: while things essentially and in the abstract more important, like the tragedy of Froda and Ingeld, are thrust away into the corners of the poem".<sup>15</sup> Even Klaeber's remarks are colored by such expectations, as though there were some haunting truth to the liedertheorie. But fortunately, partly through a number of articles on the poem's design, it is now widely recognized that the poet used his traditional subject-matter for aesthetic purposes much more sophisticated and more subtle than those of heroic lays. In 1935 Adeline Bartlett found structural units or what she calls "larger rhetorical patterns", and describes these as "a wave-like movement of lines,

a rising and falling of emphasis". On design, then, she comments as follows:

Each verse pattern is a panel or section of the storied tapestry. It has an organic unity of its own and it has also its place in the series of pictures (narrative, descriptive, or didactic) which tells a connected unified story. At any given moment the poet may appear to be more interested in the elaborate detail than in the composition of the whole.<sup>16</sup>

Although such description does not consider the manner in which the poet weaves the various pictures into a unified series, it does suggest that the story-pattern is much more than the simple narration of events. Joan Blomfield, in her view of the total design of Beowulf, has described the subject as "a circumscribed field in which the themes are drawn out by a center of attraction... the character of the good warrior".<sup>17</sup> Her implication that the poet's mind is focused upon the ideals of an heroic society, however tempered by the Christian moral code, is indeed well-founded, as is her further observation that there is no real development of plot or character. Beowulf is a flawless hero throughout the poem, performing deeds which are continually evaluated by the poet and given new dimensions.

More recently, John Leyerle has compared the structure of the poem with the "positional patterning of threads" in tapestries. Not only does this interlace design contain the story-pattern, but it also commands a special treatment of the subject-matter inasmuch as it reveals "the meaning of coincidence, the recurrence of human behavior, and the circularity of time". The interlaced structure allows for "the intersection of narrative events without regard for their distance in chronological time,



and shows the interrelated significances of episodes without the need for any explicit comment by the poet."<sup>18</sup> Such a description is certainly far removed from Klaeber's remark that "the poem...consists of two distinct parts joined in a very loose manner and held together only by the person of the hero";<sup>19</sup> and furthermore this new perspective of the design gives more weight to each of Bartlett's "verse patterns". In Leyerle's view, then, the plot, the story-pattern of Beowulf's exploits, must not be separated from what have been widely called digressions; in his own words, "unravel the thread and the whole fabric falls apart".

This brief summary of the trend of Beowulf criticism has been necessarily selective. And although one might say that much progress has been made in elucidating Beowulf as a work of art, there were several acute observations made by nineteenth-century scholars regarding the artistry of the poem, even if such interest was not at that time in fashion. It is rather ironical that the Danish scholar Nikolai Grundtvig, who discovered in 1817 that the Hygelac of Beowulf and the Chochilaicus of Gregory of Tours were one and the same, held the artistic merits of the poem in high regard: for his discovery set in motion almost a century of studies in philology and race history, but his remarks on the artistry went unnoticed, or at least were not considered to be of prime importance. In his translation of the poem, which appeared in 1820, Grundtvig calls it "a work of art boldly laid out, beautifully expressed, and in many ways gloriously executed", and in his opinion it "deserves and requires...a detailed and

thorough study".<sup>20</sup> Indeed, his remarks on the significance of the monsters and of Beowulf's fights against them are not unlike Tolkien's symbolic interpretation of them.

Finally, and to summarize, let us observe that H. Taine, in his History of English Literature, as long ago as 1864 exhibited his ability to appreciate poetry even more remote to him than it is to us now:

Time after time they return to and repeat their idea: 'The sun on high, great star, God's brilliant candle, the noble creature!' Four times successively they employ the same thought, and each time under a new aspect. All its different aspects rise simultaneously before the barbarian's eyes....The succession of thought in the visionary is not the same as in a reasoning mind. One color induces another: from the sound he passes to sound: his imagination is like a diorama of unexplained pictures. His phrases recur and change; he emits the word that comes to his lips without hesitation; he leaps over wide intervals from idea to idea.<sup>21</sup>

Leyerle has come to a similar view: that association of ideas, not logical and chronological order, is the essence of the design of the poem.

NOTES

1. More recently, a great deal of work has been done on the formulaic character of Old English verse, which has led some critics, mainly F.P.Magoun Jr., and R.P.Creed, to reason that the poem was composed orally, by a great many singers at different times.
2. R.W.Chambers, Beowulf: an Introduction to the Study of the Poem, 3rd ed., Cambridge Univ. Press, 1963, p.128.
3. A.G.Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf, Univ. of California Press, 1960, p.70.
4. Paul Baum, "The Beowulf Poet", PQ XXXIV(1960), p.389.
5. C.L.Wrenn, A Study of Old English Literature, Harrap and Co., London, 1967, p.49.
6. Just as the Eskimo has a number of words to describe certain conditions of snow, but has no one word signifying the general concept of snow, the Anglo-Saxon and his Teutonic ancestors would have been well aware of the multiple function of the warrior---the number of words used to designate 'warrior' is sufficient evidence of this.
7. F.Klaeber, Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, 3rd. ed., D.C.Heath and Co., Boston, 1950, p.lxv. All quotations are taken from this edition.
8. That is, the theory which sees the text as several individual lays placed together.
9. Ibid., p.lvii.
10. J.R.R.Tolkien, "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics", PBA XXII(1936), p.275.
11. Cf. Brodeur, op.cit., pp.39-70.
12. R.Wellek and A.Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd. ed., Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., New York, p.182.
13. Brodeur, op.cit., pp.69-70.
14. W.P.Ker, Epic and Romance, London, 1897, p.190.
15. Ibid., p.189.
16. A.C.Bartlett, The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry, Columbia Univ. Press, 1935, p.7.

17. J. Blomfield, "The Style and Structure of Beowulf",  
RES XIV(1938), p.396.
18. J. Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of Beowulf", UTQ(1967).  
U.T.C.R. QUAR
19. Klaeber, op.cit., p.li.
20. Quoted by M.A.Gilbart, Unlocking the Word-Hoard, Unpub.  
Mast. Thesis, Univ. of British Columbia, 1967, p.43.
21. H. A. Taine, History of English Literature, (trans.,  
H.Van Laun) Vol. I, 1908, p.70.

Chapter Two: THE LINEAR MOVEMENT OF THE POEM: THE THREE FIGHTS

Despite the so-called lack of steady advance, and Leyerle's revelation of the interlace texture of the complicated 'surface' of the poem, we do have a story told about Beowulf and his fights with three monsters. These fights are arranged chronologically, and there is a progression, from the defeat of Grendel to that of his mother, onward to the final fight, that with the dragon, whose resistance causes the death of the hero. However circumambient the structure may be, this basic sequence of events is presented in a straight-forward and easily recognizable manner. If we consider only this linear movement, leaving aside any kind of mythic interpretation, it is indeed "curiously trivial", and is especially suitable for translators creating a fairy-tale or, more accurately, a folk-tale, for children. Significantly, however, a great deal of the Anglo-Saxon poem must be left out of these new creations, and the whole poem then undergoes considerable changes. Most of these translations are, in fact, much closer to what C.M.Bowra calls "folk-heroic" poems than our poem is, for the composers are especially concerned with making everything clear and interesting by keeping to the main thread of their narrative. (If we single out Beowulf's three fights as the material of the main story, then any part of the narrative which is not directly connected to this core

may be considered a digression, and most of Beowulf criticism approaches the poem in this way---even Tolkien considered the reader's attitude to the monsters to be the most important factor in its poetic appreciation.)

Much early criticism was spent on establishing the folk-tales behind our poem, and even now this kind of approach is used to determine "what has gone to the making of the central fable of Beowulf, and what kind of use the poet has made of what was available to him for it".<sup>1</sup> Anyone who has turned to Boccaccio's Il Filostrato in his study of Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde can easily appreciate the usefulness of such study; for the changes, the differences between the work under study and its analogues, point the reader in the direction of the poet's imagination. But the analogues of Beowulf are particularly nebulous, for we cannot be sure what the poet had to work with, and any conclusions drawn from such study are therefore speculative. The danger of this approach may be seen in G. Smithers's analysis of the 'last survivor-dragon' crux. Having shown that in three Norse Sagas the dragon is in some peculiar way a dead man, he maintains that "we must reckon with the possibility of a misunderstanding by our poet".<sup>2</sup> Expressed so delicately, such a possibility might well be admitted, but it is as pointless to the student of literature, as the last survivor in the poem is to Smithers. It may be a loose thread from the original folk-tale, but this is beside the point in our appreciation of the Beowulf poem. However vital are the roots of the main story in the Germanic heroic age, we have, in Cotton Vitellius A xv the

workmanship of an artist, shaped from old materials into something that has meaning and significance for his contemporaries, and so the poet's Christian attitudes and values permeate the totality.

That the action takes place in the land of the Anglo-Saxons' ancestors at once tells us that the poet is harking back to former times. The story is an old one and is familiar to all:

Hwæt, we Gardena in geardagum  
beodcýninga þrym gefrunon,  
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon! (1-3)

The poet begins, not with his hero, but with the glory of the ancient Danes, and particularly that of Scyld Scefing and his magnificent and mysterious funeral. Since the discovery of the Sutton Hoo ship-burial it is evident that the poet describes the coming and the going of Scyld to set the tone of his work. In this introductory passage (the first fit begins at line 53) he is able to depict the kind of man who would be honoured in any nation; who can overcome all the neighboring peoples and render them slaves, either literally, or technically by having them pay tribute; and who provides his people with a line of able rulers. Tracing genealogy, the poet briefly mentions Beow(ulf) and Healfdene, then Healfdene's children, and then turns quickly to the activities of Hrothgar, the second son.

If it were a linear narrative, the poem would begin here, or would begin with Beowulf the Geat hearing about the monster Grendel. If it were this kind of poem, we could rightly expect

the whole story to be concerned with those glories of the Danes with which it does begin. Instead, the poet merely says that heresned was given to Hrothgar, and his band of warriors increases in strength and reputation; then the great hall of Heorot is erected. Hrothgar's prestige is derived in part from his ancestry, and he is able to rule successfully the land and its people inherited from his forefathers. Hrothgar's reign is introduced as only one of many glorious leaderships of the Danish past. The poet has set the scene of Beowulf's first fight amid great kings, but in such a way that we have no detailed knowledge of that greatness; Hrothgar simply rules like his ancestors, and his own comitatus grows in strength. We have, however, certain important details about the building of Heorot which reveal the goodness of Hrothgar; for it is in this hall that he plans to share with both young and old all that God has given him. When the healærna mæst is completed, he "whose words had power wide and far"[79] gives it the name of Heort; whereupon

He beot ne aleh, beagas dælde,  
sinc æt symle. (80-1)

Some critics<sup>3</sup> have found in this Grendel section a subplot of treachery within the Danish court which corresponds with the monster's treachery from without; and they have accordingly found in the poet's attitude toward Hrothgar and his worldly glory a kind of censure which leads him to foreshadow the deadly hate which is to arise between son-in-law and father-in-law and the destruction by fire that awaits the hall. But the poet always points to evil directly, by using the method of con-



trast: the medoærn micel awaits the destroying fire (as do all wooden constructions, unless left to rot), and the sounds of joyous revelry are endured in misery by the powerful spirit. Those sounds include the clear songs of the scop, chiefly one about Creation and the origin of man; but however beautifully God has adorned the earth-regions, there is also in existence the "feond on helle", condemned by the Creator and driven from mankind. In seventy lines of detail the poet presents a hopeless and miserable situation which is endured by the Danes for twelve years. Grendel's crimes against Hrothgar are made known in songs, and so are heard by a thane who happens to be the strongest man in the world at that time. The third fit begins with a summary of the Danish situation:

Swa ða mælceare maga Healfdenes  
singala seað; ne mihte snotor hæleð  
wean onwendan; was þæt gewin to swyð,  
lāþ ond longsum, þe on ða leode becom,  
nydwracu nipgrim, nihtbealwa mæst. (189-193)

The poet does not consider that Hrothgar himself should have attempted to fight Grendel; he presents Grendel as an invulnerable force against men of ordinary physical strength, a monster who is able to destroy thirty thanes at once. In the face of this it would be foolhardy of Hrothgar, of whom we are given no reason to expect extraordinary physical strength, to pit himself against such an enemy. He is deeply distressed mainly because as leader against Grendel he is useless, however successful he had been in past conflicts against men. Later in the poem the poet contrasts the youthful Beowulf with the aged Hrothgar, yet he never once suggests that Hrothgar could have defeated Grendel

had he been young again.

When we hear of this strongest of men who determines that Hrothgar is in need of assistance and immediately prepares to go to him, we can reasonably expect some change in the twelve-year feud, if only some long-awaited opposition. In terms of linear movement, the main action unfolds very slowly, for 500 lines intervene between the introduction of the unnamed Geatish thane and the account of his fight with Grendel. But these lines, which will be more closely studied in the next chapter, give us a satisfying picture of the Danish court and its etiquette and, more important, a definitely heroic view of Beowulf. He is a stranger in the Danish court, who carefully reveals himself and his plan of action; before this, we follow the Geatish band from the coast to the hall. The poet tells us very little about them in direct description. The coast-guard and Wulfgar are impressed with the appearance of the warriors, and of the leader in particular, and Hrothgar claims to have heard that this Geat has the strength of thirty men in his grip, which makes him a perfect match for Grendel.

Any doubts that Hrothgar may have of victory over the monster are gathered up by Unferth in the accusation of foolhardiness;<sup>4</sup> but Beowulf's reply establishes once and for all his ability to fight and overcome superhuman monsters. However successful Unferth and his fellow warriors are in human conflicts, the victorious Danes [597] are powerless in this one. Beowulf is the only man in whom there can be placed any hope of victory: this is inevitable from the basic story, from the lines which

set up the circumstances, describing the glorious Danes and the terror of Grendel, to the sudden interest in some Geat who, like us, has heard of the feud. We find only later that he is an experienced monster-fighter, and that this is considered extraordinary. Undoubtedly, the poet could have presented this material more quickly, and moved to the fight; but he was not primarily concerned with his hero beating the monster, or any other monster; if he had been, then his story would have been short indeed. What we do find, however, is the meaning and significance of the various details drawn out, and the result, as many critics have observed, is a slow and dignified epic style, complex characterization, and a most important action. As in the analogous folk-tales, other people are saved by the hero's victories; both the Danes and the Geats are protected against the superhuman destructive forces, although for each of these peoples there is a disquieting future ahead.

This saviour element<sup>5</sup> is only one aspect of Beowulf's action. The poet, however, has changed the point of emphasis from the fights to the character of the hero. The fact is that the Danes are still a very powerful people in spite of Grendel's twelve-year reign of terror, and Hrothgar's sorrow derives both from the loss of some of his best warriors, and from his lack of power against his foe. His sorrow would be lessened if he could avenge the deaths of those companions by defeating Grendel, and so Beowulf's task, as he himself sees it, is to cleanse Heorot of its ruler by night.

In terms of linear movement, then, Beowulf defeats Grendel, and a great feast and much gift-giving follows; but Grendel's

mother comes to the hall and avenges the death of her son by carrying off one of Hrothgar's closest counsellors. Beowulf then goes to the monster's lair, where he succeeds in killing the mother, and then returns to Heorot with the head of Grendel. He goes back to the Geatish court and relates his adventures to Hygelac. If we are interested only in this series of actions, then we are bound to be struck with the break in the story-pattern at line 2200, for we are suddenly told that Beowulf ruled the Geats for fifty years until a certain dragon was disturbed. What follows then is an account of the last great fight of the hero, for this dragon inflicts a mortal wound on Beowulf before it is killed with Wiglaf's help. The poem draws to a close with a description of the funeral and the burial mound ordered by Beowulf before he succumbs to his wounds.

But, as Bruce Mitchell points out,<sup>6</sup> the basic point which the poem makes is not that Beowulf kills three monsters, but that on three occasions the hero stands face to face with death. This interpretation suggests the way in which the story is told, and it emphasizes those things which the poet has emphasized. Returning, then, to the Grendel fight, we are at once told of its outcome, that God grants victory to the Geatish warriors. Any doubt up to this point that Beowulf would not be able to overcome the monster is thus wiped out by the poet. These foreshadowings function to alleviate the terror of Grendel, for he is made a formidable and overpowering opponent. The poet is saying that, however monstrous Grendel may be, Beowulf will in fact defeat him: though the opposition is so great, the hero is

revealed in such a way that we feel, together with Hrothgar, that the Geat is well suited for the task. And to say that God is on the side of Beowulf is hardly different from saying that God promotes Good rather than Evil in the world. In this poem Grendel is the Evil One, who bears God's anger.

There yet remains suspense until we discover just how Beowulf will win. Lines 703 to 727 show how the poet manages his tale: Grendel is stalking to the hall under the cover of darkness; not once, but four times we are told he is coming, and he brings with him as much terror as any monster could. The door of the hall gives way to the touch of his hands, and he stands over the sleeping warriors, a horrible light gleaming from his eyes. All this we see, as though we were in the hall with the warriors, but like Beowulf, not asleep. We are suddenly shifted to the monster's point of view, seeing through his eyes: the sight of the warriors, all of them apparently asleep, gives him cause for evil joy, since he now has hope of great feasting. Even though we know that this will be his last feast, there is still a great deal of terror, since he still has the upper hand. The vivid and gruesome description of his devouring a sleeping warrior is sufficient evidence that Grendel means instant death to the ordinary man; and however sure we are of his defeat, if Beowulf pits himself against this monster as he had promised, then he is indeed standing face to face with death.

The study of certain analogues has led some critics to find in the waiting of Beowulf while Grendel devours Hondscio the remnant of an older tradition which has the younger warrior

let the older one prove himself effective, or ineffective, before he himself attempts to fight the enemy. But the poet includes this gory description to enable us to see vividly the way in which Grendel mistreated the Danes in their own hall; the devouring of a Geatish visitor is all the more important, since it is the Geat Beowulf, with his group of warriors, who has undertaken the venture, and he now has a personal reason for attacking Grendel.

The strong and mighty kinsman of Hygelac had been, like us, and unlike the other warriors in the hall, watching Grendel's mode of attack, and he is prepared for his approach. Once seized by Beowulf, the monster is immediately filled with fear and eager to flee; he knows there is no greater hand-grip in the world than that which is clamped around his arm. The hall resounds with the noise of the struggle, but it is not really a fight, for Grendel is intent only on retreat. The Danes, who are not in the hall, are filled with panic, and are sure that the building will fall to the ground, for the mere sound of the struggle means fierce fighting. Inside the hall the benches are ripped from their places, and Grendel cries out his grvroleoð. The Geatish companions try to help in the struggle, but find their weapons are useless. Beowulf continues to hold on to the arm, and Grendel pulls away with such force that it breaks from his body. He flees from the hall, knowing that his wound is mortal, and we are told that his arm remains as a clear token that Beowulf has carried out his boast. \*

There is little doubt who is winning the fight as soon as

Beowulf seizes Grendel's arm; Grendel's reaction is entirely animal, and the action by Beowulf is similar to that of seizing a cat's tail---the cat does the pulling and the hand merely holds on. It is related in such a way that the physical strain becomes the focal point, with the climax in the tearing of Grendel's arm away from his body. The whole struggle is a test of physical strength, but the victor, although perhaps no stronger, is in the right. Grendel's terrified retreat is in a way anti-climactic, but the poet quickly brings to mind the significance of the struggle: the hall has been cleansed, the Geat has fulfilled his boast and the Danes need no longer suffer the ravages of the monster [825-833]. Although Grendel has escaped, he has left behind as a sign of his defeat his arm and shoulder. All the warriors scrutinize this great arm which is hung high up on the gable of the hall, and those who followed the monster's tracks to the bloody mere return in joy, for his death is certain. Beowulf is not happy that Grendel was able to escape, but he ascribes it to the will of God. Unferth is now a silent man as he scrutinizes the hand; for the hand which tore it off belongs to Beowulf. <sup>7</sup>

Such is the emphasis of this elliptical narrative. What happens is simple and straightforward, but the poet weaves in his patterns of meaning, as the main story moves slowly along, in such a way that the circumstances of the fight and the attitudes of the combatants are constantly in the foreground. The sceadugenga had come that night to the hall of sleeping warriors, but Beowulf was waiting for him. Before Grendel reaches the door we are made fully aware of both the

terror of his presence as he comes and the hero's own bolgenmod as he awaits, prepared for fighting, though unarmed; we are also impressed with the fact that Grendel is about to meet something which he does not expect. When Beowulf seizes his arm, all his thoughts turn from cannibal feasting to escape. It is made clear that Beowulf holds on with his mægenes craft (strength and the conviction to use it); this alone brings about Grendel's defeat.

Dæt wæs geocor sið<sup>x</sup>  
þæt se hearmscapa to Heorute ateah! (765-6)

Comparing this struggle with the other two great fights, we find that Grendel is in fact the least of the monsters, since he puts up no real fight at all. Indeed, Beowulf has greater difficulty in overcoming Grendel's mother even though he is armed, and in the fight with the dragon not only is he mortally wounded, but Wiglaf's direct help is necessary for him to kill his foe. That Beowulf needs more help each time he fights has suggested to several critics, such as H.L.Rogers,<sup>8</sup> that the poet thus "shows the weaknesses of heroic society" more than anything else; since the heroic materials, both physical strength and weapons, become less effective against superhuman forces as the poem progresses. But if this were the intention of the poet, he certainly does not emphasize it. On the contrary, along with the mounting difficulty, the great powers of both contestants become more evident: Beowulf must exhibit more strength and skill in fighting Grendel's mother, for she is so much more aggressive than her son was in Heorot. It was well-known that Grendel did not use weapons against the Danes, but depended solely upon his



brute strength. So Beowulf heroically meets him on equal terms. But no such thing is known about the monster's mother. Beowulf arms himself in preparation for the fight with her, and the poet contrives that in doing so he again meets his opponent on equal terms, for her hide is as impenetrable as his byrnie, and her knife is as deadly as his sword. Both weapons fail to cut, and Beowulf quickly seizes a greater sword to perform the task. That he must rely on something in addition to his physical strength is not so extraordinary when we realize the help which his opponent depends upon. Beowulf is now the unwelcome guest in the monster's home, and she fights, as it were, with her back to the wall, whereas Grendel at least had somewhere to flee for safety. Accordingly, she is more desperate and more aggressive, for she must either fight or die. We have no reason to expect Beowulf to fight the monster unarmed, for she is armed herself, and she is in the protection of her home. Similarly, Beowulf meets the dragon on equal terms: his iron shield counteracts the fiery breath, his byrnie performs the same function as the dragon's scales, and his sword is like its teeth. That Wiglaf actually participates in this fight, instead of, for example, merely handing the hero a more effective sword, does indeed take away some of the glory of Beowulf's personal achievement, for Wiglaf is thus made a monster-fighter also, and part of the greatness of Beowulf's deeds is that he is the only one who could fight these monsters and expect to win. But to say that Beowulf is less a hero because he needs this help does not follow from the poet's presentation of Wiglaf and the circumstances of that help. Without Wiglaf, Beowulf as king would stand alone

and in a social vacuum, and though this may be fine in a folk-tale, it hardly suits the purposes of the poet in so far as these can be determined up to this point in his poem. Beowulf's first two fights are indeed socially significant, however great the personal glory he gains through performing these tasks, and it is particularly important that his last fight, which brings to an end his heroic career, should also be set solidly within an outer frame of historical tradition; for if it has no relevance to the past and future of mankind, then it has meaning only as an isolated and personal achievement of the hero.

As he comes to each fight, the hero does need more help in addition to his own physical strength, but there is at the same time a decrease in the willingness of his comitatus to help him. In the fight with Grendel, though Beowulf has promised to fight the monster single-handed, he is surrounded by his companions in the hall. But Beowulf lies waiting while the others sleep, and when they do awaken, they are unable to help, and their leader must fight alone. In the second fight Beowulf must leave his warriors altogether, and their helplessness is made poignant in their anticipation of the results of the conflict which is so far removed from them. The Danes in fact give up hope and return sorrowfully to their court, leaving the Geats to mourn the loss of their leader. But Beowulf returns triumphant, and they return together as the victorious Geats. Beowulf has won with difficulty, and his warriors, likewise with difficulty, carry the head of Grendel to Heorot. In both these fights, Beowulf's comitatus is presented as a loyal and courageous group

who, if they could, would have helped him in his need. But such fights are for their leader alone. In the dragon fight which, as noted above, is so much more terrible, the warriors are told to stay out of the fray, and indeed such warning is unnecessary, for they all flee for safety with the first advance of the monster. Only Wiglaf, who feels the bonds of kinship and his duty as a loyal retainer, returns to help his king. The other warriors, all of whom were chosen for their bravery, are terrified by the dragon, and they have every cause to be; but Wiglaf's courage and loyalty outweigh his fear, and however terrible are the odds, he must stand by his leader. It must be noted that the conditions are different from those of the previous fights; the comitatus are physically able to help their leader if the dragon proves too great in battle. Yet it is so fierce that ordinary warriors flee for safety, and only a man like Wiglaf, whose character is fully presented by the poet, and whose own valour is more like that of Beowulf than that of ordinary men, can be of any assistance. By performing his duties as a loyal retainer he is made worthy of succeeding to the throne of the Geats, but in no way is he made equal to the great Beowulf, who had performed in his own youth tasks that were far beyond his duties as a retainer of Hygelac. If the dragon fight is isolated from the rest of the poem, then certainly Wiglaf's help in the fight detracts from the personal glory of Beowulf in the performing of his task; but if the poem is considered as a whole, the need for Wiglaf is seen not at all as evidence of the weakness of Beowulf and his heroic ideals, but rather as evidence

of the grave difficulty of the fight, the greatness of the character of Wiglaf, and the historical significance of Beowulf's last great deed. Wiglaf is thus made worthy to lead the Geats in performing Beowulf's last wishes, but he fully recognizes the greatness of his dead king, and has the treasure buried with him. Once Beowulf is dead all the Geats, including Wiglaf, are overcome with sorrow. Beowulf, in his greatness, has kept them safe as a nation, and now that he is gone, they can expect the worst; for when a man like Beowulf passes away, as he must, all mankind must suffer the loss.

The dragon fight is indeed made significant for human society, but this is not different from what is made of the other fights. We have seen how the poet presents the first fight, by changing the narrative focus in such a way that the event itself is used to portray important aspects of the characters involved in the event, and he makes all the more significant the social settings of the action. The results of the Grendel battle are related before the actual struggle occurs, but only to have the significance of the action made more evident. Likewise, of each of the three fights we are given three accounts which vary in details.

Repetition of the main events, the three fights, certainly does retard the linear movement, but the several accounts are essentially variations of the single event. Beowulf's own account of his struggle with Grendel reveals fully his heroic attitude toward such a fight: he was intent on killing the monster there and then, but was unable to keep him from escaping. The monster was too desperate to be stopped, but he left behind his arm and

shoulder in order to save his life. God must have willed the monster's escape, but the wound is deadly, and therefore God must have sentenced him to death. As pointed out above, Grendel's escape detracts from Beowulf's personal victory, and it is necessary that the fight should continue into an encounter with the monster's mother; the task is completed when Beowulf brings the head of Grendel back to the hall. Beowulf also relates his adventures to Hygelac after returning to his homeland, and not only are some details added in this account of his fight with Grendel, but there is a marked change in emphasis. Beowulf tells of all the Geats awaiting the coming of the monster, and he describes Hondscio as the first of the Geats to fall in the battle. Hygelac would naturally want to know the name of the warrior, but Beowulf has made the role of Hondscio more valiant than it really was. As Beowulf would have it, the monster planned to seize each of the Geats and pack them away in his glof. It is precisely at this point, when Beowulf seizes Grendel's arm and terrifies the monster, that the hero says

To lang ys to reccenne, hu ic <sup>x</sup>ðam leodsceaðan  
yfla gehwylces ondlean forgeald;  
þær ic, þeoden min, þine leode  
weorðode weorcum. (2093-2096)

Beowulf tells the story of a group of Geatish warriors who boldly await the monster in the Danish hall, but when the real conflict occurs, between himself and Grendel, he merely summarizes the results of his actions. There is no doubt that he alone has brought Grendel down, for the other warriors were quite useless in the struggle; but Beowulf is no braggart who seeks only personal renown. Similarly, the fight with Grendel's mother is described to Hrothgar as very difficult but fortunately God granted that

he saw the huge giant-sword. Beowulf gives the hilt of the sword to Hrothgar: it is described in detail, for the king studies it closely. Without this sword Beowulf would not have achieved victory, and accordingly he makes a great deal of it. To Hygelac Beowulf describes this fight very briefly:

holm heolfre weoll, ond ic heafde becearf  
in ðam guðsele Grendeles modor  
eacnum ecgum; (2138-2140)

It is not told in detail---although the poet's account was rich in description---surely because the other Geats have no part in this fight. Beowulf has achieved personal glory by his deeds, but he in no way boasts of this to his own leader. On the contrary, he claims only that he has brought fame to the Geatish king and his people, as indeed he has.

Let us return now to the linear movement of the poem.

When Beowulf has defeated the two monsters in the land of the Danes, a great feast is enjoyed by all, and Beowulf is duly rewarded, as are his warriors, before he returns home. Most of the feast is taken up with what may be considered Hrothgar's reply to Beowulf's account of the fight in the lake, and though his speech is often seen as an isolated homily on how a good king should live, it is really the turning-point of the poem, for Hrothgar can well imagine that the young hero will become king of the Geats. We might well ask what Hrothgar could effectively say in reply to the tremendous deeds performed by the hero who had saved his kingdom from the ravages of the hitherto unconquerable Grendel, but what he does say is the highest compliment that he could have made. The poet has carefully presented

Hrothgar: he is ruler of a very powerful nation, and early in life was granted heresped. But at the time of Grendel's feud he is an aged and grey-haired man who must depend on his wisdom rather than on physical strength to continue his rule successfully. Whether or not sapientia and fortitudo<sup>9</sup> are controlling themes in the poem, both are certainly necessary characteristics of a king in heroic society, if he is to have a long and peaceful reign.

Hrothgar has ruled the Danes for fifty years, and though he was himself powerless against such monsters as Grendel, such a long reign can only suggest that his kingship was successful; we need not go outside the poem to realize the significance of this, for the poet alludes to several lays and histories which vividly portray the vicissitudes of Germanic heroic society. Indeed, these people lived by the sword and, consequently, died by it, but the poet sees Beowulf primarily as a monster-slayer who engages in few conflicts with other men. Hrothgar's advice tells us of the dangers of being such an independent hero as Heremod, and he need only remind Beowulf that Death will one day take each of us. Power can easily distort a man's good judgment, and so Beowulf must be especially careful. These are the possibilities into which Beowulf's great strength could take him; if he becomes over-proud, then nothing good will ever come of his life. From Hrothgar's homily we seem to know what Beowulf will not become as a king.

The hero returns to Hygelac and hands over the rewards he has earned, as a loyal retainer should, and the story seems to

draw to a close with a eulogy not unlike the last lines of the poem:

Swa bealdode bearn Ecgðeowes,  
guma gudum cuð, godum dædum,  
dread æfter dome; nealles druncne slog  
heorðgeneatas; næs him hreoh sefa,  
ac he mancynnes mæste cræfte  
ginfæstan gife, þe him God sealde,  
heold hildedeor. (2177-2183)

But this, we soon find, is only a summary of Beowulf's character which suggests at once that he would make an ideal king. Following these lines the poet has Hygelac give to Beowulf what may be taken as a symbol of Geatish rule, namely, Hrethel's sword, along with a great tract of land, a hall, and the rank of chieftain. At this time Hygelac ruled the wide kingdom, but in later days (ufaran dogrum) Beowulf ruled it well, after both Hygelac and his son Heardred had been killed in battles against foreign enemies. It is here that most editors divide the poem;<sup>10</sup> and indeed it is most tempting to think only in terms of the chronological order, for up to line 2199 Beowulf is a young man, living under the rule of Hygelac, and from line 2200 onward, he has been for fifty years king of the Geats. But if the total passage, the thirty-first fit, is studied as a unit, the poet's point of emphasis, his pattern of thought, covers this chronological jump. The similarity of this pattern to that of Hrothgar's reign is made obvious. Beowulf is living the good life of chieftain, then king; he rules well, like Hrothgar, for fifty years, when suddenly a dragon is disturbed and ravages the land. The remainder of the poem is the story of his fight with this monster.

Obviously the poet wishes to get to the point as quickly



as possible, however he may expand and develop from there, just as he has Grendel stirring in the darkness immediately after Heorot is built. The pattern is also evident in Hrothgar's advice to Beowulf:

Swa ic Hring-Dena hund missera  
weold under wolcnum ond hig wigge beleac  
manigum mægþa geond þysne middangeard,  
æscum ond ecgum, þæt ic me ænigne  
under swegles begong gesacan ne tealde.  
Hwæt, me þæs on eþle edwenden cwom,  
gyrn æfter gomene, seopðan Grendel wearð,  
ealdgewinna, ingenga min;  
ic þære socne singales wæg  
modceare micle. (1769-1778)

Such fondness for sharp contrast has already been noted; add to this the contrast between Hrothgar the aged king and Beowulf the youthful warrior, which is made throughout the Grendel section, and we should not be surprised that the poet makes a similar contrast between Beowulf the loyal retainer and Beowulf the aged king. We can assume, at any rate, that Beowulf's fifty year rule implies successful kingship.

If straight-forward narrative and steady advance are characteristics of a well-told story, then the dragon section is even more of a disaster than the one about Grendel. The main action may be summarized very briefly, leaving out a few details, although the poet takes nearly a thousand lines to tell the story. Having presented the sudden appearance of the dragon, both in the Geatish kingdom and in the poem, he goes into minute detail to describe how the dragon was aroused, who caused this, and how the treasure-hoard had originally been amassed. But to say that all this is digression from the main story hardly does justice

to what the poet has made of the main plot. And it is especially evident in this dragon section that the poet has reshaped what probably was a folk-tale or possibly two separate lays about the hero's fights, in such a way that linear movement and steady advance are furthest from his purposes. The significance of the last survivor, however related to the dragon in analogues, must be realized if we are to grasp what the poet makes of the treasure. Indeed, he begins to weave the web of Beowulf's destiny around this wealth so that Beowulf's last speech is not surprising; he believes that the treasure will benefit his people:

Ic ðara frætwa Frean ealles ðanc,  
Wuldurcynige wordum secge,  
ecum Dryhtne, þe ic her on starie,  
þæs ðe ic moste minum leodum  
ær swyltdæge swylc gestrynan.  
Nu ic on maðma hord mine bebohte  
frode feorhlege, fremmað gena  
leoda pearfe; ne mæg ic her leng wesan. (2794-2801)

Treasure was indeed essential in heroic society and the poet includes the right use of it in his presentation of glorious kingship. In the opening lines of the poem he moralizes on the famous Danish dynasty:

Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean  
fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme... (20-1)

And he is surely praising Hrothgar for keeping his promise when he deals out "sinc æt symle" after the hall is built. But the last survivor's speech sets the pattern for dealing with this particular treasure: there are no heroes left to enjoy the treasure, and so it is given over to the earth. In the later age the Geatish people have undoubtedly realized the greatness of their king, and a treasure won by his death must needs be buried with

him, for there are no warriors, no heroes left who are worthy of it. Wiglaf is the only one who can be considered a hero, but it is he who conducts the funeral ceremonies and has the treasure brought out of the cave and buried with the remains of Beowulf. Taken out of its context, Wiglaf's last speech may suggest a fault in the character of Beowulf similar to Byrhtnoth's ofermod in the Battle of Maldon:

Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan  
wræc adreogan, swa us geworden is.  
Ne meahton we gelæran leofne peoden,  
rices hyrde ræd ænigne,  
þæt he ne grette goldweard þone,  
lete hyne licgean, þær he longe was,  
wicum wunian oð woruldende. (3077-3083)

The Geats wished Beowulf to leave the dragon alone, presumably because it was such an awesome opponent. Likewise, Hygelac did not want Beowulf to go out against the terrible Grendel. In both instances the concern is for Beowulf's life, first a devoted thane's, and then the beloved king's. Hygelac had suggested that the Danes should settle their own feuds, that Beowulf need not risk his life for other tribes; but the hero's might, we are told by both the poet and Hrothgar, is a gift from God, and thus should be used to perform good works. Beowulf stands above all other men, and it is he who must fight the dragon, for there is no one else able to do so. Such is the fate of a hero: in Wiglaf's own words, he must "heold on heah-gesceap"[3084].

So Beowulf goes to meet the dragon in an atmosphere of doom. Wherewithal youthful exuberance characterized the first two fights,

a heavy melancholy pervades this one. Beowulf is now as sad as Hrothgar was in his feud with Grendel, but there is no doubt in his mind that he should fight, for he must avenge this attack on his land and his people. The seriousness of the attack is made clear in the fact that his own great hall is burnt to the ground by the dragon. He has a special shield made, and however sad he is, he is also restless and eager to get on with the fight [2420]. After reviewing the battles of his time and the one now in prospect, Beowulf shouts a challenge to the dragon, for "he gebolgen was", and the battle begins. It is the same hero who dived into the terrifying mere in pursuit of Grendel's mother. Age has not withered his strength as it had Hrothgar's; in the ensuing conflict it is evident that both his strength and his courage are as great as ever. But however close he was to death before, this time it is "immeasurably near". He is saddened by the thought that he must leave this life, and for the poet whether or not Beowulf wins the eternal life of the Christian doctrine is beside the point: throughout the poem all emphasis is on this life here and now, and not on the life after death. So the main point is again that Beowulf comes face to face with death, only this time, since he is an old man now, it is much nearer.

It is no wonder, then, that the action proceeds very slowly. Interwoven into the linear movement are accounts of the two Geatish-Swedish wars and of Hygelac's Frisian raid. That these are not adornments of the main plot is clear from their several appearances, each of which takes on new meaning within the vary-

ing contexts. Geatish history is drawn into the main action, since the passing of Beowulf brings to an end not only a long and successful reign, but also the peace which we are led to believe was dependent on the character of the king. We are therefore told of possible national disasters by members of the Geatish people, and it is indeed not an unusual feeling that when one's king dies, there will be chaos. History may well support such expectations; but in the poem the purpose of such thoughts is of course to add to the stature of the king.

In this attempt to deal with the poem as a linear progression it should be evident that the three fights of Beowulf are presented chronologically, but certainly not straight-forwardly and objectively. If the poet worked upon an earlier lay about some great man who excelled in defeating monsters, his own poem is made into a great deal more than a narrative of great events. The skeletal plot may indeed be trivial, and if we can separate this plot from the poem, the more important things will assuredly seem to be "thrust into the corners".<sup>11</sup> We may say that there is so much that is not essential to this plot, which is attached only very loosely. But the poet has reshaped the original story to suit his own artistic purposes, and therefore we cannot blame the poem for lacking qualities which the poet himself shows little attempt to achieve. The fact is that a study of the linear movement gives us very little of the poem, and to discuss Beowulf's fight with the dragon without considering those many passages of Geatish history is to distort the work of the poet at the expense of that fuller appreciation of the

artistry of the poem which should be the aim of such discussion.

NOTES

1. G.V.Smithers, The Making of Beowulf, Univ. of Durham, 1961, p.1.
2. Ibid., p.10.
3. See especially, K.Malone, "Review of A. Bonjour's Digressions", Speculum XXVI(1951), and J.L.Rosier, "Design for Treachery: the Unferth Intrigue", PMLA LXXVII(1962).
4. This is not to say that all the Danes think Beowulf's planned adventure is foolish. Rather, all but Unferth indicate that they are grateful for this hope of victory.
5. Klaeber first saw in Beowulf a 'Christ-figure', and more recently, P.F.Fisher, in his "The trials of the Epic Hero in Beowulf", (PMLA LXXIII[1958]) finds the theme of redemption and judgment.
6. See B. Mitchell, "Until the Dragon Comes...Some Thoughts on Beowulf", Neophilologus XLVII(1963).
7. The reappearance of Unferth here and later is rather unusual, since he is a minor character, like Wulfgar and the Coast-guard; but it is obvious that the poet reveals his character as a contrast with that of his hero.
8. H.C.Rogers, "Beowulf's Three Great Fights", RES VI(1958), 339-55.
9. See R.E.Kaske, "Sapientia et Fortitudo as the Controlling Themes of Beowulf", SP LV(1958), 423-457.
10. More recent translations of the poem retain the divisions into fits.
11. W.P.Ker, op.cit., p. 189.

### Chapter Three: PRESENTATION OF THE HERO

Heroism is what Beowulf is about, and from the opening declamation on the Danish royal dynasty, to the eulogy on the death of Beowulf, each verse-paragraph, each so-called digression, ultimately has something to say about this central point of Germanic life. We are now to see how the poet goes about presenting this material, how he succeeds in making his hero the paragon of heroism. There is little need to stress that the poet's attitude toward Beowulf and his great deeds is one of awe and admiration,<sup>1</sup> for this has been recognized by every reader of the poem; we therefore find that to discuss the character of Beowulf is to discuss the whole poem, for it is around him that the poem revolves.

As we have seen, the first 193 lines set the scene of Beowulf's first mighty deed, the cleansing of Heorot, and through these lines the poet establishes the greatness of the Danish dynasty, thereby indicating the greatness of the forces against which Hrothgar and his warriors are helpless. The final summary of the situation before Beowulf is introduced---"nydwracu nibgrim, nihtbealwa mæst"---calls to mind all of these details. The poet then presents Beowulf in terms of great physical strength:



Dæt fram ham gefrægn Higelaces þegn  
god mid Geatum, Grendles dæda;  
se was moncynnes mægenes strengest  
on þæm dæge þysses lifes,  
æpele ond eacen. (194-198)

The terror of Grendel has also been presented as a physical force, but untempered by human values; none of the remaining Danes dares to face him, for none is of strength and courage to match the monster's. The poet then carefully presents the equal of Grendel, the man that can stand up to the attacks; and significantly, this is done mainly from the Danish point of view. However much we, and the Anglo-Saxon audience, must know of the heroic legends and historical traditions alluded to in the poem, the hero is in fact unknown, and is presented as the stranger he is in the eyes of nearly all of the Danes; the poet makes the character of his hero the focal point of his story, and he reveals it throughout, both in the main events and in the so-called digressions.

We are told that a certain thane of the Geatish king Hygelac hears of Grendel's feud with the Danes, and immediately resolves to go to Hrothgar, "þa him was manna þearf"[201]. Indeed, Hrothgar's warrior-band has been drastically depleted, but more of the same will hardly help him: rather, he needs the help of some greater man than an ordinary warrior, someone who can in some way equal the terror of Grendel. That Beowulf was the strongest of men at that time is given as a fact without any kind of evidence. It is quite probable, however, that the poet and his audience have a special regard for Hygelac and the Geatish people, for Frankish historians had written of his gigantic size,

along with an account of his Frisian raid.<sup>2</sup> As already noted in the first chapter, this fragment of verified history set scholars to work on the historical elements of the poem, producing voluminous research on matters which, though indirectly valuable to the student of literature, are not directed toward a fuller understanding of the poem as poetry. That the poet used much of the material of history, as opposed to fiction, can hardly be doubted, but it is equally certain that the poet used this material in order to shape his poem, and he should not be expected to have aimed for historical accuracy: he used such 'historical matter' alongside what we call 'fabulous matter', and it is highly doubtful that he himself made such a distinction. We have reason to question Dorothy Whitelock's assumption that the Anglo-Saxon poet is historically accurate in his presentation of Hygelac as a Geat, while the Frankish historians made him a Dane for the sake of clarity. However, some knowledge of the rather elusive and mysterious Getae, and their connection with giants, referred to by both the ancient Greeks and the early medieval Latin writers, may explain the poet's choice of the people to which his hero belongs, if this had not already been done in the material he worked with.<sup>4</sup>

However conjectural this may be, we may assume that the name Hygelac supports, for the poet and his audience, the idea that Beowulf was the strongest man in the world; his possibly being one of the Getae would reinforce this contention. The hero's introduction also incorporates the poet's solution to another artistic problem; Grendel's strength was superhuman,

inasmuch as human force represented by the contemporary generation of the Ar-Scyldingas was completely helpless in the face of it, and therefore the force needed to overcome Grendel must be even more superhuman. But if his hero is to be superhuman, then his life, his deeds, however awe-inspiring, are that much less meaningful, less significant in terms of everyday human life and everyday human deeds. It is obvious that the poet saw in his vision of heroism a way of life for mankind in general, and realised that however magnificent was a battle between one man and a superhuman monster, such an event became significant for mankind only if worked into the context of human society as the poet and his audience knew it. Thus Grendel is made the descendant of Cain and, however terrible and monstrous, he is also considered in human terms. Beowulf is made a member of the Geatish nation, and however mighty he may be, he is yet very much a human being, exhibiting the responsibilities of a follower of Hygelac, and later, those of a king of the Geatish people.

To repeat, then: the poet assumes nothing, beyond what he presents in his poem, about the character of his hero, and seems to depend upon our lack of knowledge for a particular aesthetic effect; we come to know Beowulf through the experiences of the Danes, to whom he is almost as much a stranger as he is to us. It is, indeed, by this method of presentation that the story is unfolded, and it demands little more of that 'suspension of disbelief' than that with which any work of art is to be approached.<sup>5</sup> The Danish coast-guard is the first to meet the Geatish band, when they arrive on the Danish shore. Instead of having

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Beowulf and his men brought straightway to the king's court, the poet follows in detail the arrival and journey overland to Heorot. The wary coast-guard, in keeping with his position, sees possible dangers in the arrival of an unknown band of armed warriors: he sees wargear ready for use (fyrðsearu fuslicu). Having gone down to meet them, he boldly shakes his spear and asks who they are and why they have come there. Although there is later mention of other Danes under his orders, the poet presents him as if alone, confronting the fifteen armed warriors from the ship; certainly, if these had been hostile they could have made short work of him. The Danish land is well-guarded by brave men---they are not at all cowards. In his speech the coastguard shows his warrior quality; he expresses himself both eloquently and formally, and his boldness makes his mention of the appearance of one of the strangers even more significant:

Næfre ic maran geseah  
eorla ofer eorþan, ðonne is eower sum,  
secg on searwum; nis þæt seldguma,  
wæpnum geweorðad, næfne him his wite leoge,  
ænlic ansyn. (247-251)

However awesome in appearance is this armed man, the coastguard makes clear that he recognizes this only as appearance, and that therefore he may very well be mistaken. We need not be told to whom the coastguard refers, and se yldesta replies to the Dane's queries, formally and to the point. He identifies his band as Geats, and more particularly, as Hygelac's heorðgeneatas. The speaker's father was the famous Ecgþeow (who as we find later had lived with the Danes), and the band has come to help Hrothgar overcome Grendel. These essential points of the Geatish

reply are more significant when we consider the way in which the speaker presents them. Being the son of Ecgtheow places the speaker in a noble lineage and, as we discover later, links him with the Danish king in a peculiar way. The way in which the main characters are introduced, by designating the name of their father, is indeed conventional and formal, but it is also quite useful in calling to mind the qualities of the father to illuminate those of his son.<sup>6</sup> If the coastguard already knew of Ecgtheow (and we are given reason to believe that he did), then this is sufficient identification, and it does indeed suffice for the Dane. On the matter of his purpose, Beowulf does not boast that he has come to defeat the monster against whom the Danes are helpless, for this is neither the time nor the place for such boasting. Instead, we hear Beowulf asking the advice of the coastguard on their great mission (micel ærende):

Du wast, gif hit is  
swa we soþlice secgan hyrdon,  
þæt mid Scyldingum sceaðona ic nat hwylc,  
deogol dædhata deorcum nihtum  
eaweo þurh egsan uncuone nið,  
hynou ond hrafyl. (272-277)

Beowulf, in effect, reminds the Dane of the terrible affliction, and declares his wish to advise the king, "frod ond god", how to defeat his terrible enemy. In this way Beowulf has suggested that it is the king himself, Hrothgar, who will achieve victory, who will bring joy to Heorot again. It is this point which is emphasized throughout Beowulf's visit, for Hrothgar is never once regarded as a weak leader--he is old and wise, but in no way weak, and it is Beowulf's attitude

to him thus revealed which stresses the greatness of the Danish people and their leader. The coastguard will hardly want to oppose victory over Grendel, and it is this choice which Beowulf has given him: either demand that the strangers depart at once, or let them go as welcome guests to help Hrothgar overcome his enemy.

In his reply to Beowulf's identification and statement of purpose, the coastguard announces his position:

AEghwæpres sceal  
scearp scyldwiga gescad witan,  
worda ond worca, se þe wel þenceð. (287-289)

Not only does he believe in the good intentions of the Geats, but he himself will guide them to Heorot, and in addition the Danes will protect their ship against enemies. Thus the Geats are received as welcome guests in the land of the Danes, significantly through the appearance and the one speech of se yldesta. Although Beowulf is the centre of attention, the poet attends to him rather discreetly: we still know only that he is Hygelac's thane and Ecgtheow's son, but though we do not know his name we have seen how he affects others around him---not those who are familiar with him, but one to whom the Geat is a total stranger. All this is presented in a significant context. Beowulf is made no great but unattached adventurer who boldly and even recklessly comes to some foreign land to deliver the people from their unconquerable foe; he is indeed made great, but firmly within the confines of human society, and as part of that heroic social group, the comitatus. He submits to the society of the Danes, and

recognizes Hrothgar as the true leader in this land. His intentions are, indeed, honorable, as he sees the Danes are in need of help, and not at all does he come to fight Grendel in order to win glory at the expense of Danish fame.

As the coastguard turns back to his watch, he wishes the Geats luck on their mission. That he should call upon the Father Almighty (Fæder alwalda, 316) to protect them has led some readers to consider the lines a Christian interpolation, and indeed they would be if such a wish were out of character, and clashed in this context. But there is nothing non-Christian so far in the story, and Beowulf and the coastguard are not of un-Christian character. Without imposing upon the poem our own ideas of Christian and pagan attitudes, we can explain such a call for good luck as evidence of the poet's intention to show good characters in this presentation of Anglo-Saxon ancestral, but pagan, society. In doing this he has brought them as close as possible to a Christian idea of goodness.

From the point where the coastguard leaves the Geats, the ten lines describing the warriors approaching Heorot focuses entirely upon their armoured appearance:

Guðbyrne scan  
heard hondlocen, hringiren scir  
song in searwum, þa hie to sele furðum  
in hyra gryregeatwum gongan cwomon. (321-324)

The sight and sound of this advancing band certainly impressed the Danes at the hall, and the poet summarizes his description, was se irenþreat/ wæpnum geworþad (330-1).

Wulfgar, Frothgar's "ar and ombiht", begins his questions:

Hwanon ferigeað<sup>x</sup> ge fatte scyldas,  
græge syrcan, ond grimhelmas,  
heresceafta heap? (333-335)

But Wulfgar is in no way discomposed at the sight of these armed men outside his lord's hall. On the contrary, he is struck with their appearance, and exclaims

Ne seah ic elpeodig  
þus manige men modiglicran (336-7).

He supposes that they are not exiled adventurers, but have sought his king "for wlenco" and for "higebrymmum". The formality of the ensuing conversation is striking, but again pointed. Beowulf is se yldesta, and there is no doubt that he whose appearance was praised by the coastguard is the leader and speaker on both occasions. He wishes to inform the great prince of his mission,

...gif he us geunnan wile,  
þæt we hine swa godne gretan moton. (346-347)

Again Beowulf's sense of decorum, his recognition of the king's superior position, is emphasized, and Wulfgar, who is known for his bravery and wisdom, responds graciously to his attitude toward Hrothgar:

Ic þæs wine Deniga,  
frea Scildinga frinan wille,  
beaga bryttan, swa þu bena eart,  
ond þe þa andsware ædre gecyðan,  
ðe me se goda agifan þenceð. (350-355)

Wulfgar's four appellations referring to Hrothgar are variations on the single concept of kingship or rule, but they are far from identical in meaning and significance: wine Deniga indicates the warm and friendly relation between the lord and his followers which is necessary in a comitatus-society; frea Scyldinga



conveys his lordship and superiority over his people, the sons of Scyld; beaga bryttan describes the duties of that kingship, for it is by dealing out treasures that the lord rewards the heroic deeds of his followers; beoden mærne indicates his renown, and it is not coincidental that Beowulf uses the same epithet or formula in referring to Hrothgar [345], for it is in this respect that he has come to know of the Danish king. Although Beowulf is the centre of attention, the position of Hrothgar is most important in the background. Because of the story, we expect that Beowulf will get into Heorot and tell the king that he plans to fight Grendel, and indeed he does. But here at the doorway he is not presented as bold and great; rather, he awaits the permission of the king to enter. Beowulf is at once respectful and courteous, and could very well be only the formal emissary of a neighboring state who comes to the Danish court with an ærende. This is Beowulf's own interpretation of his mission, for we find later that his lord, Hygelac, did not want his thane risking his life to fight on behalf of a foreign people, although the wise men of the Geats had recommended it.

Wulfgar identifies the men for Hrothgar, and adds that the yldesta is called Beowulf; it is the opinion of Wulfgar that he should not refuse to see these Geats, for

Hy on wiggetawum wyrðe þinceað  
eorla geæhtlan; huru se aldor deah,  
se þæm heaðorincum hider wisade. (368-370)

So Wulfgar is also impressed with the character of Beowulf,

and bids Hrothgar welcome them. There are two things, at this point, which should be noted about the presence of the Geats at Hrothgar's court. Since they disembarked, detailed attention has been given to the appearance of the group. Their armour had flashed in the eyes of the coastguard, and their war-byrniés shine and clang as they march to the hall. Upon reaching the hall, the Geats sit down, but the poet then gives a complete picture of the scene as it must have appeared to Wulfgar:

Setton sámeþe side scyldas,  
rondas regnhearde wið þæs recedes weal;  
bugon þa to bence, byrnan hringdon,  
guðsearo gumena; garas stodon,  
sæmanna searo samod atgædere,  
æscholt ufan græg; was se irenþreat  
wæpnum geworþad. (325-331)

It is this imposing sight which evokes the comment of Wulfgar quoted above, and which prompts him to recommend a welcoming gesture from his king. The second point is that oscillation of attention between the individual, Beowulf, and the whole group of Geats. Since a single man without lord or retainers is in heroic society an outcast whose life is filled with misery and wretchedness, the problem, for the poet, may be stated thus: how can he create a hero who embodies the contemporary ideals of heroism, who is perfect in every way and performs deeds which are beyond the capabilities of ordinary human beings, and yet make him an integral part of his society—which seems to mirror the poet's own society? Compared with heroic poetry in general, Beowulf is, according to C.M.Bowra, the product of a Christian moralist; now, one of the characteristics of heroic poetry is

that it is told objectively and in a straightforward manner, for oral singers do not draw morals from their tales, but are interested almost wholly in the story itself and its capacity to entertain their listeners.<sup>7</sup> That our poet moralizes on several occasions cannot be denied, but we must recognize that such moralizings are indicative of the poet's interest beyond the simple story-pattern, and he presents some important views of the Anglo-Saxon concept of heroism as the main force in his society. In the Anglo-Saxon Christian epics the hero is heroic in the Christian context: his lord is recognized as the Christian God, the battle is against evil, and the reward is eternal salvation. The poet of Beowulf, who was in all probability familiar with the Christian epics, chose his pre-Christian subject-matter to show the potential goodness of a society whose sole concern was with life here and now: he does not make a Christian epic out of his ancestral materials. However close the sentiments expressed by both Hrothgar and Beowulf are to those of Christianity, there is no mention of Christ or of an after-life; the Danish king values goodness, generosity and wisdom, not as means to gain eternal salvation, but as a means to living the good life here on earth. Although the poet moralizes on the virtues of this kind of living, he significantly does not indicate whether these best of pagan heroes have in fact gained eternal salvation.<sup>8</sup> He merely presents the possibility.

The poet, then, takes care to present Beowulf both as the individual great man that he is, and as a part of the social group of Geats that have arrived at Heorot. Beowulf seems to

impress people as the Geats' natural leader. At the mention of the leader's name, Hrothgar recognizes him as the son of Ecgtheow (thus confirming Beowulf's own words)—the husband of Hrethel's only daughter—and not only does the king know of Beowulf's lineage, but he has heard

  þæt he þritiges  
  manna mægencræft on his mundgripe  
  heaporof hæbbe.   (379-381)

Hrothgar's first thought is that "halig God" has sent this mighty Geat as hope against Grendel;<sup>9</sup> he plans to foster this hope by following the heroic code in offering treasures as reward for success. Not only is there no suggestion that these worldly things are useless in the Christian sense, but the poet dwells on such treasures as arms and armour as evidence of the greatness and goodness of this society. So Wulfgar returns to bid the Geats welcome; but in accordance with custom, they must leave their shields and spears outside, and enter the hall only with their "guðgetawum/ under heregriman". It is not Beowulf alone who enters the hall:

  Aras þa se rica, ymb hine rinc manig,  
  þryðlic þegna heap; sume þær bidon,  
  heaðoreaf heoldon, swa him se hearda bebed. (399-401)

But, although they all enter, it is Beowulf who is central:

  ...on him byrne scan,  
  searonet seowed smibes orþancum,   (405-6)

and it is he who begins the exchange of speeches. He goes straight to the point: he is Hygelac's kinsman and thane, and has wrought many great deeds in his youth. Therefore, having heard of the ravishings of Grendel, the wise men of the Geats

advised him to go to Hrothgar, for they know of Beowulf's "mægenes cræft"[418]. His victorious record includes the defeat of five giants and innumerable seamonsters. His one request of Hrothgar is that he will permit him and his eorla gedryht to cleanse Heorot. Not only will he fight Grendel, but with his sense of fair play he will meet him unarmed, since the monster "cares not for weapons". It will be a contest of sheer strength.

This initial boast of Beowulf is not so much that he will defeat his opponent, but that he will stand up to the monster as his equal. The ultimate purpose of the venture, to cleanse Heorot, is held in reserve, for Beowulf goes on to point out the dangers of such a task:

Wen' ic þæt he wille, gif he wealdan mot,  
in þam guðsele Geotena leode  
etan unforhte, swa he oft dyde,  
mægen Hreðmanna. (442-445)

Moreover, he speculates on the chance of defeat: Hrothgar need not worry about the disposal of his body, for Grendel will take care of it by eating it; his byrnie, "Hrædlan laf,/ Welandes geweorc", Hrothgar can send to Hygelac, and the hero closes his speech with the ominous words, "Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel" [455]. We are left with the main thread of his speech, that it is fate, the web of destiny, which has brought him to Hrothgar. We are not left with the feeling that this <sup>fate</sup> wyrd is an all-powerful force which controls the lives of men, but rather, that it is the outcome of action, the simple 'what-will-happen' of a man's future. Beowulf has superior strength, and therefore, according to the Geatish wise men, he should use it to perform

good deeds; so he determines to fight Grendel, and he does this with full realization of the possible consequences. The fight is considered by him as a contest, and therefore the contestants must be made equal. But though we have heard, like Hrothgar, that Beowulf has the grip of thirty men and that he has fought other monsters, the terror of Grendel still looms in the background as an overwhelming force, and we wonder whether Beowulf's sense of equality is rooted in over-confidence.<sup>10</sup>

But the poet's reason for developing these conditions of battle is indeed to make the venture a great act of courage and strength, in no way the result of foolhardiness and foolish boasting. The moral implication is that, given the monster's wrath, and one man whose physical strength is such that he can meet the monster on equal terms, it is his moral duty to use his gift when it is needed. There is, then, a suggestion that Beowulf fights evil on behalf of the good God, but it is only a suggestion and it is never stated explicitly. If it were, we would have a Christian epic, but early in the poem the poet states that these people did not know God as he and his Christian audience know Him, and though he has the main characters refer to God (always "the Father"), they never completely grasp the Christian significance and meaning of His presence. He is recognized as the supreme force of Good, and is confessed by Hrothgar when he hears of Beowulf's coming. Likewise, when Beowulf spies a great sword among the treasures in the cave, which is of such great size and quality that it is able to penetrate the monster's tough hide, he recognizes that God has

intervened to help him. Grendel and his mother being of the race of Cain, they are said to fight perpetually against God and His goodness, but the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxon people, though pagans, are not such exiles from mankind; they have simply not had the good fortune to know of the teachings of Christ. They are as pre-Christian as the characters of the Old Testament.

Hrothgar's reply to the Geatish hero is a subtle weaving of history into the present situation. The Danish king had done Beowulf's father a service, for he had settled Ecgtheow's debt or wergild to the Wylfings with fe<sup>x</sup> and ealde ma<sup>x</sup>omas, in return for Ecgtheow's oaths of allegiance. Thus it is that treasure can save a man's life! Immediately following the account which he gives of past events, Hrothgar describes the unending feud that Grendel wages against the Danes. Beowulf is surely expected to feel some duty toward the Danish king in return for Hrothgar's help to his father, though Hrothgar is by no means explicit. He is, however, very willing to bestow treasure upon Beowulf for taking upon himself the settling of the feud between Grendel and the Danes, since Grendel would not settle the feud for money, and he would indeed have nothing to do with peace of any kind. His kind of feud promised to be endless, since he completely overpowered the Danish warriors. Referring to the victims of this feud, Hrothgar says, "hie wyrd forsweop/ on Grendeles gryre", indicating the trend of wyrd for the past twelve years. It is the pattern of both past and future events which is designated by wyrd, and in this case the past has not been hopeful. It is not extraordinary, then, that Hrothgar adds

that God can easily put an end to the dolsceaða<sup>x</sup>: God does intervene in the affairs of men, Hrothgar does not pray for such help, for Divine Providence is further removed from him than it is from Christians---but it is not completely beyond him. In addition to this, the monster that Beowulf plans to fight is presented as an enemy of God's goodness, which is all the more reason why God should help men who cannot pray to Him. Beowulf expresses the sentiment,

Wyrd oft nereð  
unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen deah! (572-573)

in which wyrd seems to be some kind of power over the affairs of men. But it is like Divine Providence, for in Christian doctrine God will intervene for a deserving man, that is, one who is faithful to Christian teachings; the poet sees God helping deserving pagans whose ellen is good. Expressed most simply, evil in the Christian world is not different from evil in a pagan or pre-Christian world, in terms of human society and man's life here on earth.

Hrothgar ends his reply to Beowulf by recalling the terror of Grendel, but significantly he does not comment on Beowulf's petition. The Geats are invited to participate in the Danish feast, and the same sounds of joy which had in the beginning angered Grendel again emanate from the hall; Beowulf is lost among the revelry, and the scop's song resounds, for

Ðar was hæleða dream,  
duguð<sup>x</sup> unlytel Dena ond Wedera. (497-8)

But the note of discord is struck by the man of that name, Unferth, who in his jealousy doubts whether Beowulf is any hope



against the monster. Indeed, the interruption is sudden and complete, for there is no sound of joy during the taunt and the reply, though the feast continues after Beowulf has made his boast. The hundred odd lines which comprise the conversation have been studied by a number of critics, and their interpretations of the meaning in terms of the whole poem are various and contradictory. But few will deny that this "Unferth Intermezzo", as Klaeber has called it, gives us some valuable insight into the character of the hero and the nature of heroism.

Unferth, we are told, is greatly vexed by the arrival of a man who plans to do battle with Grendel, a task which he himself dares not attempt. Beowulf is certainly already being honoured simply by his offering to fight the monster, but Unferth has apparently heard of one of Beowulf's adventures which, if true, is no proof of the greatness of the Geat. He thus begins his taunt with an accusation of reckless and foolish boasting:

Eart þu se Beowulf, se þe wið Breca wunne,  
on sidne sæ ymb sund flite,  
ðær git for wlence wada cunnedon  
ond for dolgilpe on deop wæter  
aldrum nepdon? (506-510)

The swimming contest which Unferth had heard of lasted seven days, and both Breca and Beowulf ventured their lives only to keep their foolish promises, for the task was not worth the risk. Not only did Beowulf go on, heedless of advice, but he lost to Breca. No wonder, then, that Unferth expects worse things of Beowulf than victory over Grendel. For any ordinary man to fight Grendel is, according to Unferth, whose fame among

the Danes as a brave and courageous warrior depends upon the invulnerability of the monster, mere foolhardiness that can only end in defeat. It should be noted that the poet deems it sufficient to indicate Unferth's position in the Danish court by having him seated at the foot of the king. There is no indication that Unferth speaks out as the byle or orator of Hrothgar; but rather, from the poet's introduction of the man, we are led to believe that he is considered, or at least that he considers himself, the greatest warrior among the Danes, whose deeds are greater than those of any other man throughout the world. In Beowulf's reply we find out what great deeds really are, for the hero contrasts his own deeds with those of Unferth.

Beowulf's reply has rightly been considered a masterpiece of rhetoric, inasmuch as he uses all that his taunter had said. First, "wine min Unferð<sup>x</sup>" has, "beore druncen", said a great deal about Breca and his adventure, but the truth is that he himself, Beowulf, showed greater strength in swimming than any other man. Admittedly, their boasts were not necessary, for they were mere boys at the time, but it was not simply a swimming contest. On the contrary, Beowulf had swum out to sea fully armed, and engaged in a terrible struggle against sea-monsters. Significantly, his description of the under-water battle against the "man-eaters" can only remind the Danes of their own lack of success against Grendel; but whereas these monsters expected to feast on his body, they received only the sword's edge, and in the morning there were nine niceras lying dead on the shore. This was no idle venture, for now seafarers can pass over the high seas

unhindered by these monsters. "Wyrd often saves an undoomed man when his courage is good," moralizes Beowulf, and it is emphatically his courage which saves him from the "fara feng" of the sea-monsters. Beowulf thus reveals the difference between foolhardiness and great courage, and shows furthermore that his adventure with Breca was successful because he had that great courage.

This is exactly the point which Beowulf must make in order to be permitted to fight on the Danes' behalf. And to strengthen his position further, he brings Unferth to heel by accusing him of lacking that courage needed to fight such great battles:

No ic wiht fram þe  
swylcra searoniða<sup>x</sup> secgan hyrde,  
billa brogan. (581-583)

Neither Breca nor Unferth has performed such bold deeds, so the latter has no reason to accuse Beowulf of foolish boasting in planning to fight Grendel. Unferth had conceded that the Geat was strong in human conflict, but had declared that this was no reason to hope for success against Grendel; in introducing Unferth the poet had indicated that the Dane thought himself the greatest fighter on earth, and in his manner of questioning the past deeds of the Geat he confirms his jealous attitude. Certainly we are led to believe that Unferth is famous for his past deeds, but we hear nothing of these until Beowulf gives an ironic twist to his reputation. Not only has he not fought battles as great as Beowulf's, but he is infamous for the slaying of his kinsmen. Such a deed is set in complete contrast with Beowulf's deeds, for it is one of the greatest of human evils, and rightly brings

down upon the Dane the good anger of the better man. The condemnation is expressed in Christian terms, and we may feel that the poet goes too far in crediting Beowulf with such notions, but the poet is emphasizing the point that the good pagan recognizes evil when he sees it, and quite rightly speaks out against it.

As Beowulf sees it, Grendel would not have performed his horrible deeds if Unferth's courage had been as great as he claims. But Grendel has found out that he need not fear the "sige-Scyldingas" at all. Indeed, Hrothgar's sorrow is compounded by the fact that there is no Dane who can stand up to the monster, and there is no mention of even the slightest resistance by his warriors who were killed. Beowulf concludes his speech with the heroic boast, but it is strikingly different from the first boast in which the prospects of defeat are emphasized. In the midst of the feast, which includes drinking of mead and beer, Beowulf is more positive as to the outcome of the fight, after Unferth's accusation:

...ic him Geata sceal  
eafod<sup>x</sup> ond ellen ungeara nu,  
gupe gebeodan. Gæp eft se þe mot  
to medo modig, sippan morgenleht  
ofer ylða bearn opres dogores,  
sunne sweglwered suban scineð! (601-606)

The need for opposition to Grendel's attacks is as clear as day, and Beowulf indeed made a great attempt to prove that he is worthy of the Danes' trust. It is his firm resolve which both Hrothgar and Wealhtheow admire, and it is now that Hrothgar gives his permission. It has taken the poet 700 lines to bring his hero face to face with Grendel, but so much more do we now know

of the character of the hero, and of his heroic situation. It is no trivial matter to let Beowulf act as champion of the Danes, and Hrothgar is explicit about this:

Næfre ic ænegum men ær alyfde,  
siþðan ic hond ond rond hebban mihte,  
ðrypærn Dena buton þe nu ða.  
Hafa nu ond geheald husa selest,  
gemyne mærpō, mægenellen cyð,  
waca wið wrapum! (655-660)

The glories of the Danish people have been duly portrayed: they are no mean people, but world-famous warriors feasting in the greatest of halls. We are never given to believe that they are weak, but rather that Grendel is so over-poweringly terrible. He is presented as one with mankind, and yet totally against other men. Although he and his mother are more human than the dragon can ever be, they are the enemies of all mankind. Grendel sees only sleeping warriors, not Danes and then Geats; he indiscriminately kills both; and similarly the dragon is aroused by one and then rages against all mankind.

Beowulf arrives at Heorot as a thane of Hygelac and he behaves as a good retainer should; but his "mægenes cræft", supported by an equally great spirit, makes him the one human being who has any hope of defeating Grendel. For men like Unferth it would be foolhardy to attempt to fight the monster, but for Beowulf, whose battle experience includes successfully fighting such beasts, the performance of such a task is most right and fitting. The poet does not present us with a detailed picture of the physical forces meeting in this great fight, for we know only that Grendel can destroy thirty thanes at once, and that

Beowulf is said to have the strength of thirty men in his hand-grip. The terror of the monster is realized in the accumulated psychological reaction of the Danes to the monster's attacks. Indeed, the mere sight of Grendel's lake strikes terror into the hearts of these men to such an extent that Beowulf's plunge into the murky waters becomes a supreme act of courage.

The poet's solution to the problem which arose, probably, out of the materials with which he worked is not found in any one line: it is in his expansion of the arrival of Beowulf, and in the leading up to Hrothgar's giving over the great hall, the symbol of Danish power, to the protection of the Geats, that the character of the hero is revealed, and the significance of his actions is understood. The terror of Grendel, though it has eliminated most of Hrothgar's best warriors, is not so much that it threatens the lives of all Danes, for the living warriors merely slept in places other than the hall [138]. Rather, the monster has upset the social life of Hrothgar's court by ruling in the hall when darkness comes, and it is this which makes Hrothgar so unhappy. Beowulf offers to cleanse the hall of its ruler by night, thus giving Grendel his due reward for the terrible crimes he has committed against mankind. His defeat of Grendel, however much it shows the greatness of his strength and courage, equally shows how such a hero can utilize his special gifts for the benefit of mankind. The ordinary hero, who engages in human conflicts only, performs deeds of valour which are important to his tribe; whereas Beowulf comes not as an exile-adventurer seeking treasure as reward for

his brave deeds, but rather as a thane of Hygelac who recognizes his duty to put his extraordinary strength to good use against an evil force in the face of which ordinary human strength is useless. On the surface, it may be said that such heroism is not applicable and has little relevance to a society of men whose strength is ordinary, and who are not afflicted by such monsters, and indeed, this is the view of W.P.Ker. But the artist deals in possibilities; in which, given certain conditions of extraordinary strength against extraordinary enemies, Beowulf is the ideal character who makes the best of the situation and whose actions are therefore truly heroic. He is indeed one of mankind, and his actions are exemplary, though they cannot be duplicated by ordinary man.

The first thing we are told about Beowulf is that

se was moncynnes mægenes strengest  
on þam dæge þysses lifes,  
æpele ond eacen... (196-198)

and it is this gift which determines the great destiny of the hero, for like a king who must use his gifts wisely and well, Beowulf recognizes his moral duty to use in the best way those things which God has granted him. He approaches the Danish court completely subservient to the recognized authority, Hrothgar, and his main purpose is to be granted permission to fight Grendel. Although his seeking of permission draws emphasis away from the fight itself, which is described rather briefly compared to his presentation at the Danish court, it is essential to the poet's interpretation of the actual fight. We have, then, more emphasis upon the circumstances of the fight than on the fight itself, and

more focus upon the psychological aspects of the characters than on their physical attributes. In this last respect it is enough to know that Beowulf is exceptionally strong and that Grendel incites terror in the best of ordinary warriors.

The poet has the utmost regard for the total cohesion of the poem. The Geatish band of warriors are an imposing sight to the Danes, whose awed reaction to Beowulf is important for our understanding of him. Beowulf stands majestically in his full armour before Hrothgar and asks the Danish king that the famous byrnie ("þæt is Hrædlan laf, / Welandes geweorc") be returned to the Geatish king, Hygelac, in the event of his defeat. During the feast, however, attention is directed toward the truly great character of the hero, discovered through the speeches. Once he is in the presence of Hrothgar, Beowulf stands alone and unarmed among the Danes---concentration now is upon his real worth. Soon he stands alone and unarmed against Grendel. But for the contest with Grendel's mother we are given a detailed description of Beowulf arming himself before entering the monster's lake, not simply that we may revel in the sight of a fully armed mighty warrior, but to give him the means by which he achieves victory in his second struggle.

We have, then, a complete presentation of Beowulf' character: it is not immense physical strength, proved in the fight, which is the main point of emphasis---though it may have been in the original folk-tale---but rather the truly powerful character of the hero that the poet reveals in the 700 lines preceding the



actual demonstration of his strength.

NOTES

1. In discussions on the audience's attitudes toward the individual hero and his deeds there is considerable disagreement, but most admit that a hero whose actions are "epical" performs as representative of his group. He is admired as representative of what is best in man. Accordingly, Elizabeth Sewall writes, "What are Gilgamesh or Beowulf or Dante or Adam doing, if they are not carrying us forward with them, exploring and struggling and suffering, out in advance of us but one with us still?"
2. See R.W.Chambers, op.cit., pp.3-4.
3. Dorothy Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf, Oxford at Clarendon Press, 1951, p.60.
4. The historical identity of the Geats has long been a debated subject, though the Old Norse Gautar has been in recent years the more popular choice, for lack of a better possibility. However, Jane A. Leake has an attractive suggestion that the poet placed Beowulf among the Getae, that tribe of people whose mysterious existence is mentioned in both classical and early medieval writings.
5. Certainly, we are expected to accept the existence of Grendel, his mother, and the dragon, along with the great strength of Beowulf, but the poet presents these in such a way that we cannot doubt his word.
6. This technique is used throughout the poem. That it is no mere ornamentation is seen in the introduction of Wiglaf into the action; for Weohstan and his sword are considered part of the character of Beowulf's loyal retainer. See R.E.Kaske, "Weohstan's Sword", MLN LXXV(1960), pp.465-8.
7. Even Aldhelm, who was said to have drawn crowds by telling heroic tales, did not draw morals from them; having captured the people's attention, he then turned to spiritual matters.
8. The poet's attitude to his pre-Christian characters has been linked with the "semi-Pelagian" doctrine that though grace is necessary for salvation, all men are equal before God. See C.Donahue, "Beowulf, Ireland and the Natural Good", Traditio VII(1949-51), pp.263-277.
9. Though Hrothgar sees Beowulf as a man sent by God, it must be noted that he did not pray for such help. See lines 171-188.

10. Both J. Leyerle and G.N.Garmonsway find that heroism depends upon "a certain excess" and indeed it does; but most ideals are such that we must rise above the ordinary if we are to approach them. Neither the Maldon poet nor the Beowulf poet explicitly condemn such ofermod: and it is no wonder, for they are in fact celebrating the effects of this excess.

#### Chapter Four: THE DRAGON AND THE DEATH OF BEOWULF

If the Grendel adventures, or the story of Beowulf in the land of the Danes, reveal the actions and the character of an ideal warrior, a loyal retainer who is at the peak of youth and strength, then the dragon adventure certainly reveals the actions and character of an ideal king. The poet underlines the significance of Beowulf's fight with the dragon by drawing into this main story the history of Geatish wars with the Swedes and Hygelac's Frisian expedition, and by extending the story to include the doom of the Geatish people. These events alone do not reveal the hero's greatness, although we might expect that Beowulf, as the strong right arm of the king of the Geats, would have an important part in Hygelac's and Heardred's wars, and that later, as king himself, he would leave behind him a strong and powerful nation, unthreatened by neighboring tribes. This is, at least, the parallel picture of the glorious Danish dynasty at the beginning of the poem, where God Himself is said to have granted woroldar to the Danes in the person of Scyld's son, Beow(ulf), for He had seen the fyrenbearf of people who were for a long time without a strong leader.

Beowulf's destiny is given an historical significance, for

it is bound with historical allusions, and ultimately with the defeat of the Geatish people. This accounts for the material which is not directly connected to the main story; but this material has diverted attention from the glorious death of the hero to the inglorious suggestion of national defeat. A few critics<sup>1</sup> who attempt to locate a Christian "message" of the poem in the death of the hero therefore interpret the burial of the useless treasure which Beowulf won at the cost of his life as indicating the purposelessness of the fight itself; and moreover, it is seen to emphasize the hero's tragic flaw, namely, his placing too much importance upon worldly treasures. Their argument runs that if Beowulf's role in this last part of the poem is compared with that of Hrothgar in the first part, there is evidence of a paradox, a conflict between the role of a hero and the role of a king.<sup>2</sup> If there is one, then Beowulf cannot perform both roles without detracting from one or the other. Now Hrothgar was a wise and good king, but age had withered his strength and therefore his fighting prowess, so that he is in no way a hero, and he does not attempt to perform such a role. But Beowulf is still the epitome of the strength and courage that he displayed in earlier years, and in performing the good deeds of a great hero he endangers the lives of his subjects: clearly foreshadowed is their defeat in the near future. Such a view seems to accord with Wiglaf's sentiments on his king's last fight:

Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan  
wraec adreogan, swa us geworden is. (3077-8)

The ultimate flaw, then, is in the role of a hero---he is one

who performs his deeds in an historical vacuum without regard to the possible consequences of his actions. Beowulf, we are to understand, is not aware of what will happen after his death, and in fact he does not care; instead, he is concerned with personal glory and consequently, contrary to the advice of his people, he goes out to fight the dragon. If the allusions to the past wars of the Geats and the Swedes and to the probable future wars give an historical perspective to Beowulf's death, then indeed the character of Beowulf as king has a grave weakness and his fight with the dragon is not a glorious deed at all, but a foolhardy one which destroys both himself and his people. The poet can be said, if this is so, to have shown the basic weakness of pagan heroic society, and ultimately, the weakness of that heroism which is directed not toward God, but toward glory among men and worldly things.

Such an interpretation, however, does not follow from the poet's presentation of the death of Beowulf, but rather it distorts his emphasis; his main technique of exposition is that of contrast, and it is significant that we have no explicit contrast to show any weakness in the hero's character. On the contrary, following the death of Beowulf comes an impressive presentation of the funeral and the tower made to mark his grave on Hronesness. The praise heaped upon the memory of their king is, like the treasure which is heaped on his ashes, not at all useless and vain, in terms of poetic significance. The fact is that those same people who see in the death of their king their own defeat also recognize that theirs was a glorious king whose worth is

far greater than their own. Indeed it would be grossly inconsistent of Wiglaf to criticise Beowulf's last act as foolhardiness, and then to claim that he is "wigend weor<sup>x</sup>ofullost"[3099]. There is throughout the dragon section a consistent attitude toward Beowulf's life, his last battle and the consequences of his death, and there is truth in the suggestion that the poet has extended the Grendel story, which presents the glorious life of his hero, in order to bring about the glorious death of that same hero. This extension is implicit in that passage of transition which has Beowulf heaped with honours, as a thane of Hygelac, and then a few lines later presents him as a king whose reign of fifty peaceful years is interrupted suddenly by the fury of the dragon. The poet does not simply relate the event; he is mainly concerned with the character of the hero, and the significance of his actions. There is no suggestion that Beowulf should not fight, but rather, it seems imperative that he should do so, for the same reasons as those that made him visit Hrothgar. In his own words,

Nis þæt eower sið<sup>x</sup>,  
ne gemet mannes, nefne min anes,  
eorlscype efne. (2532-2535)

Only he can face the monster; this is not an idle boast, for eleven of his best warriors find the terror of the dragon too much, and flee for safety. Only Wiglaf finds the courage to enter the fray, being of the same stock as Beowulf himself.

The dragon story is separated from the youthful adventures of the hero only chronologically---there is no reason for reading it as a separate entity. Klaeber has maintained that each story

could stand on its own; that the dragon fight was not "dependent for its interpretation on the events of the first plot".<sup>3</sup> Certainly the adventures of the youthful hero in the foreign land of the Danes are separate from the last adventure of that same hero in the land of which he is now king. But the poet presents a great deal more than a simple monster-fight, and all that goes into his story is necessary for the poet's emphasis. That he depends upon our knowledge of the character of Beowulf as he has presented it to us is recognized by Klaeber, since he describes the poem as consisting of "two distinct parts joined in a very loose manner and held together only by the person of the hero."<sup>4</sup> But, because of the fashionable interest in origins colouring his view of the poem, Klaeber is more inclined to see the basic story-pattern than what the poet has done with it in making his poem.

After the few lines describing how the kingdom came into the hands of Beowulf, we are told only that he ruled well for fifty years and "wæs ða frod cyning, / eald eþelweard"[2209-10], until a certain dragon began to ricsian in the dark night. The pattern thus recurs, for Hrothgar had ruled for fifty years until Grendel took over his great hall. The poet thus summarizes the earlier situation:

Swa rixode ond wið rihte wan,  
ana wið eallum, oð þæt idel stod  
husa selest. (144-146)

Beowulf is as wretched as Hrothgar was under Grendel's rule at night, for the dragon has set burning all Geatland, surrounded the people with "bæle ond bronde", and even destroyed Beowulf's



own home, the "gifestol Geata". This is surely far worse than Grendel's kind of warfare, for at least Heorot itself withstood his attacks. The poet's choice of words here is meant to recall for us the splendor and significance of Heorot; in comparing the two situations we easily realise the greater of the two evils. Grendel could not approach the Danish gifestol;<sup>5</sup> but the dragon melts that of the Geats, thus destroying the symbol of the power and glory of the people and their king.

Although Beowulf is weighed down with sorrowful broodings on the possible reason for such adversity, he immediately "contrives vengeance"[2336], and orders the making of a great iron shield to withstand the heat of the dragon's flames. His immediate resolution parallels his decision to go to the assistance of Hrothgar, for it is the recognition of that same heahgesceap that Wiglaf later mentions [3084]. For vengeance following the death of AEschere, Beowulf had set out against Grendel's mother, and had said to the unhappy Hrothgar that "it is better to avenge the death of a friend than to mourn greatly"[1384-5]. He recognizes that he must perform the task against the dragon alone, for it is far too great for other men; as for himself,

no he him þa sæcce ondred,  
ne him þæs wyrmes wig for wiht dyde,  
eafoð ond ellen... (2347-9)

We are then given an account of Beowulf's share in Hygelac's Frisian expedition and of his role during Heardred's reign. The poet brings in historical material to suit his purposes, for at this point Beowulf is ready to fight the dragon, and his fight with Grendel is recalled. We hear of the hero's escape from

Frisia by swimming away with thirty hildegeatwa on his arm, which again emphasizes his great strength. This is followed by a brief account of Beowulf's succession to the Geatish throne. The passage, easily considered a digression into historical tradition, has two important functions: first, the reference to Grendel recalls Beowulf's experience in fighting monsters, and his duty to do so, which leads us to accept once more that Beowulf is the only man for the task; secondly, the poet's account of his succession to the throne again brings out the hero's high regard for social usages, for Hygd had offered him the kingship, but he chose to help the young Heardred, the direct descendant of Hygelac, and therefore, in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxons, the rightful heir. The poet also credits Beowulf with the avenging of the death of Heardred, though we find later on that he was only indirectly connected with the slaughter of Onela. Although Beowulf obviously was an important follower of both Hygelac and Heardred, the poet does not concentrate upon his hero's activities in human conflicts; they are different in kind from his three great fights with the monsters.

Nevertheless, the glory of Beowulf's reign at this point is that he has survived numerous human conflicts. The poet summarizes this background in the lines

Swa he niða gehwane genesen hæfde,  
sliðra geslyhta, sunu Ecgðiwes,  
ellenweorca, oð ðone anne dæg,  
þe he wið þam wyrme gewegan sceolde. (2397-2400)

The poet wants us to realize that this will be Beowulf's last fight, which will end in his death. The actual outcome of the fight, that the monster is slain, but not before he has delivered

an attack which will end the hero's life, is the climax for which the poet carefully prepares us with the prophecy:

Sceolde lændaga  
æþeling ærgod ende gebidan,  
worulde lifes; ond se wurm somod,  
þeah ðe hordwelan heolde lange. (2341-2344)

We are to recognize the greatness of Beowulf's deed. Part of this greatness, indeed the main part, is that Beowulf knows that he will die. He knows he will be standing face to face with Death, just as he did when he met with Grendel; only now he is an old man. Yet he is as fearless and courageous as he has always been and as determined as before upon a contest as equal as possible.

That the hero acts as the self-sacrificing saviour of his people is suggested, but certainly not emphasized by the poet, for just as he had fought Grendel's mother to avenge the death of AEschere, so he goes now to fight the dragon with vengeance in mind. That the mere-monster would have continued her attacks is not clearly evident, but she was killed nevertheless; as for the later crisis, Wiglaf reveals that the Geatish people had advised Beowulf to leave the dragon in its barrow, not to provoke it as he planned to do. If we are to believe that the dragon will not continue his night-burnings, then the actions of Beowulf take on a rather different significance from those of a saviour. The dragon has revealed himself in a most terrible manner; he has wrought destruction among the Geats, and this should be avenged by Beowulf if he has the courage and strength to face the creature. Ordinary men would wisely shrink from

such a fight, but Beowulf, the experienced monster-fighter, is the right man for it. In the Grendel fight the poet focuses, not upon the mere defeat of the monster, but upon the way in which Beowulf faces his deadly foe, and though the other Geats try to help, their actions are quite useless, and it is Beowulf alone who performs the task. Although he is now gloomy of thought, "which was not his custom", he does not doubt what he must do. His fifty-year reign of peace is suddenly ended, and his first thought is that he has broken ealde riht and has brought down the wrath of the eternal Lord. But no more is said of this, and we find him determined to avenge the dragon's crimes.

What the poet means by "old law" cannot be exactly and clearly known, though it is tempting to equate it with the Christian concept of 'natural' law. The phrase does function as an allusion to Beowulf's recognition of moral duty; and his determination to act in accordance with this duty indicates his judgment of the situation, that he has not, after all, broken ealde riht. Between his gloomy thoughts and his determination for vengeance comes the full realization of his heahgesceap.

Those writers who believe that Beowulf risks his life unnecessarily, thus placing the lives of his people in danger, in fact ignore the even more ancient law of death. For at this point in his life Beowulf is faced with an all-important choice, not the choice between life and death, but between possible death in an heroic fight and death by any one of the ignoble ways enumerated by Hrothgar:

þæt þec adl oððe ecg eafopes getwæfed,  
eft sona bið,

oððe fyres feng, oððe flodes wylm,  
oððe gripe meces, oððe gares fliht,  
oððe atol yldo; oððe eagna bearhtm  
forsited ond forsworced; semninga bið,  
þæt ðec, dryhtguma, deað oferswyðeð. (1762-1768)

In his comforting reply to Hrothgar's earlier tale of woe Beowulf had expressed the traditional heroic sentiments about glory in life:

Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan  
worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote  
domes ær deape; þæt bið drihtguman  
unlifgendum æfter selest. (1386-1389)

And it is Beowulf's intention to win victory over the dragon before death takes him away from his people and the joys of life: that he should die because of wounds inflicted by the dragon has full poetic justification. The glory of the hero's death is thus made even more apparent in its contrast with the usual ways in which ordinary men meet death; and although the poet rightly refrains from having Beowulf speak directly about his endedæg, that is, he does not say that since he must die, he will fight the dragon, yet the tone of the dragon story is elegiac, including the hero's speeches before the fight. In terms of the main plot, the justification for the dragon fight is to arrive at a noble death for the great man, and so the whole part is pervaded by tragedy and gloom.

But again, Beowulf prepares for the fight fully intent on victory, and in no way is he shown a hero different from what he was in his youth. He had armed himself against Grendel's mother in such a way that the two met on equal terms; and now, against the dragon's fire he has made the special shield, and against the tough hide and teeth he bears his armour and sword.

The difficulties encountered by the hero increase from fight to fight until the point is reached when he must sacrifice his life in order to be victorious. In the Grendel fight the contestants are unarmed: physical strength and determination settle this wrestling match. But Grendel's mother exhibits no such great strength, though she has little difficulty in carrying off AEschere. But whereas Grendel reveals only hatred of human joy, his mother is much more human, for her motive is revenge; and she takes only one warrior, but displays her cunning by leaving his head on the shore to terrorize those who would dare to follow her.

On the other hand, the dragon is completely overpowering; he is fifty feet in length and in one night-attack he ravages the entire country. Until the dragon comes Beowulf has lived a glorious life, and the death of this creature involves the glorious death of the hero.<sup>6</sup> The account of the actual fight follows two long speeches by Beowulf which end with the traditional heroic boast:

Nolde ic sweord beran,  
wæpen to wyrme, gif ic wiste hu  
wið ðam aglæcean elles mehte  
gylpe wiðgripan, swa ic gio wið Grendle dyde;  
ac ic ðær heaðūfyres hates wene,  
oredes ond attres; forðon ic me on hafu  
bord ond byrnan. (2518-2524)

Indeed, it would be foolhardy for him to fight the dragon unarmed and unprotected: this is a positive statement of his courage and greatness, and it is essentially the same as his earlier boasts. The poet has carefully set out the two roles of hero and king in such a way that they do not conflict.

Grendel's feud with the Danes comes at precisely the right time in Beowulf's heroic career and likewise the dragon comes when he is most needed---that is, for the purposes of the poet.

Although it is easily recognized that the three fights become more difficult, it is also true that Beowulf's courage and strength become more evident. In the first fight, once the hero has gripped the monster's arm, we hear mainly about the immediate fear of Grendel, whose resistance at once collapses. Against Grendel's mother Beowulf must show greater strength and skill in fighting, and his entering the gruesome lake takes a great deal more courage than simply waiting in Heorot for Grendel; he has to enter the lake more as an explorer of unknown regions, than as a great fighter boldly attacking the monster, and her grappling with him before he reaches the bottom in some measure reverses the roles of monster and hero in the first fight, for Beowulf is now the intruder. But in the dragon fight the poet focuses upon Beowulf's bold assault on the creature's domain, which draws it out to meet him.

We might have expected him to approach the barrow in the same way as the slave had done, for if this man could sneak past the dragon to steal a cup, possibly Beowulf could also catch him off guard.<sup>7</sup> But again, the poet is interested not so much in the defeat of the monster as in the character of the hero and his manner of facing the overwhelming enemy. After sitting to relate the history of the Geats in his lifetime, climaxed with the account of his crushing Dæghrefn, Beowulf apologizes for his need of arms and armour in this fight, and

"trusting in his strength" he boldly gazes upon the entrance of the barrow.<sup>8</sup> However fearsome the dragon, Beowulf shows himself equal to its terror:

Let <sup>x</sup>ða of breostum, <sup>x</sup>ða he gebolgen wæs,  
Weder-Geata leod word ut faran,  
stearcheort styrmdē; stefn in becom  
heaðotorht hlynnan under harne stan. (2550-2553)

At the first sign of the dragon, his fiery breath, the hero raises his shield made just for this danger; then we are told that the heart of the hringboga was ready for battle, and so is Beowulf, who draws his good sword, "gomele lafe,/ ecgum unslaw". The poet thus summarizes:

æghwæ<sup>x</sup>orum wæs  
bealohycendra broga fram o<sup>x</sup>orum. (2564-5)

Since Klaeber's comment on the "remarkable gradation" in the three fights, more attention has been given to the dragon's power than to that of its opponent. Klaeber's claim that we tremble for the venerable king is a response not actually created by the account of the fight: his sword fails, but we have already seen this happen to the hero in his mighty stroke with Hrunting against the hide of Grendel's mother. He may still survive. We may indeed tremble because of the poet's reminders that the hero has reached his endedæg; but Beowulf himself does not tremble at all. He must fulfil his heroic duty.

The account of the fight is simple: the dragon makes three attacks. The first is against Beowulf alone, in which his sword fails to cut. The second time the dragon attacks, Beowulf has the help, although unavailing, of Wiglaf; at the turning-point in the underwater fight he had successfully used the gigantic



sword, but this time his sword breaks because the blow is too mighty for it. In the third attack, "þa him rum ageald", the dragon grips Beowulf around his neck, but Wiglaf, his kinsman, strong and resourceful, strikes his blow and weakens the dragon just at the moment when it is intent on Beowulf; the king then comes to his senses and cuts the creature "on middan". The fight ends with the dragon killed and Beowulf mortally wounded, as he now knows:

wisse he gearwe,  
þæt he dæghwila gedrogen hæfde,  
eorðan wynne; Ða wæs eall sceacen  
dogorgerimes, deað ungemete neah. (2725-2728)

He did not fight the dragon to win a glorious death; on the contrary, at the dragon's first attack we are told that the shield would protect Beowulf's life and body a shorter time "þonne his myne sohte"[2572]. There is a victory in his death which becomes explicit in the speech he now delivers:

Ic Ðas leode heold  
fiftig wintra; næs se folccyning,  
ymbesittendra ænig Ðara,  
þe mec guðwinum gretan dorste,  
egesam Ðeon. Ic on earde bad  
mælgisceafta, heold min tela,  
ne sohte searoniÐas, ne me swor fela  
aða on unriht. Ic Ðæs ealles mæg  
feorhbennum seoc gefean habban;  
forÐam me witan ne Ðearf Waldend fira  
morÐorbealo maga, þonne min sceaceÐ  
lif of lice. (2732-2743)

Beowulf has indeed kept the ealde riht to the end, and is innocent of the crimes of treachery he mentions: he has lived a good and noble life and so dies happily. Again, all emphasis is on this life on earth, and though Waldend fira would suggest to the Christian Anglo-Saxon the eternal life with God in heaven,

the poet is careful to keep Beowulf's attention on the good life here and now. We have then, only a suggestion of Beowulf's eternal salvation; that is, the possibility is left open. But the pagan world knows nothing about this, and so all attention is diverted to the treasure and what Beowulf has left behind.

The fight itself takes up only 57 lines [2569-2591, 2669-2705], but ~~the~~ the whole 1,000 lines of the dragon adventure revolve around it, expanding the circumstances, the character of the hero, and the loyalty of his retainer. In his last words Beowulf expounds the ideals of the life of heroism and kingship, for now he is "old enough and sufficiently full of honours to die happily"<sup>9</sup> and there is for him a sure victory in death. As king of the Geats he leaves with his people the great treasure-hoard of the dragon. But the poet was not content to end his poem short of an historical context. The Geats choose to bury the treasure with their king; which Professor Brodeur interprets as indicating the tragic significance of Beowulf's death. The king leaves the treasure with his people, hoping for their continued peaceful and glorious existence. But the treasure is cursed. They bury it with him, thus frustrating his last wish. The tragedy of Beowulf's death is therefore, as Brodeur sees it, that he dies in vain; for not only do the Geats lose their great leader, but his death, involved as it is with the curse on the treasure, which cannot benefit anyone, leads directly to their own doom.

Beowulf's reign was not successful in the same way as that of Scyld, his Danish forerunner. The "god cyning" Onela [2390]

had graciously let Beowulf become ruler of the Geats, after Heardred was defeated, and though we are told that Beowulf avenged the death of the young Geatish king, he does not rise in prestige,

oð þæt him aghwylc ymbsittendra  
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,  
gomban gyldan... (9-11)

as the "god cyning" Scyld had done. Beowulf does not make his enemies footstools; rather, his reign of fifty years seems to be one of peaceful co-existence, with his country surrounded by enemies who will not attack as long as Beowulf is king. And this is the point of the whole last part of the poem: the great king is dead, and so the Geats can expect the kind of life they lived under Hygelac and Heardred, namely wars and defeat. Now there is no one of such power as Beowulf to rule them in peace amidst the warrior-nations. No wonder, then, that Wiglaf attacks the other warriors for their cowardice, for the death of Beowulf brings to an end the giving of gifts, the joys of peaceful life which have characterized the king's glorious reign. The warriors ran away to save their own lives, but as Wiglaf points out,

Deað bið sella  
eorla gehwylcum þonne edwitlif! (2890-1)

Here death is linked in a peculiar way with heroic life, for a hero is one who stands face to face with death. A hero whose moral duty leads him to face the dragon is indeed living a glorious life. If Beowulf had chosen to forego his vengeance on the dragon, he would have placed himself in a situation

similar to that of Hrothgar, which, however glorious among the nations, was inglorious in the Grendel feud. The poet, it should be noted, does not for a moment question Beowulf's resolve to avenge the destruction: in his mind, there is only one right way for his hero to act. And what follows Beowulf's death is sorrow, felt by the Geatish people all the more deeply because of the doom that faces them.

NOTES

1. Most notably, Margaret E. Goldsmith's "The Christian Perspective in Beowulf", CL XIV(1962), p.604; and H.L.Rogers, "Beowulf's Three Great Fights", RES VI(1955), pp.339-355.
2. This conflict has also been seen in terms of that "inherent excess" of the heroic age. See J.Leyerle, "Beowulf the Hero and the King", MAE XXXIV(1965), pp.89-102; and G.N.Garmonsway, "Anglo-Saxon Heroic Attitudes", Francinlegius, eds., J.Bessinger and R.P.Creed, New York Univ. Press, 1965, p.139.
3. F. Klaeber, op.cit., p.li.
4. Klaeber, loc.cit.
5. There is some controversy on what the lines 168 and 169 mean, and further, to whom they refer. The parallelism being demonstrated supports the contention that "he" refers to Grendel. A.G.Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf, considers the lines refer to Hrothgar.
6. Without considering material other than the main action and the mysterious curse, T.A.Gang, in his "Approaches to Beowulf", RES III(1952), sees the death of the hero as an isolated, particular disaster, the result of a particular curse and a particular piece of bad luck.
7. Such a method of fighting dragons is not unparalleled; see Chambers's Introduction, p.193.
8. Mrs. Goldsmith has made much of the absence of the hero's recognition of the will of God; but our interpretation of such "Christian" references, as showing only the poet's intention to portray his characters as good men, makes her interpretation rather unlikely, and thus sees hers as setting unnecessary limitations upon the poem.
9. Brodeur, op.cit., p.76.

## Chapter Five: CONCLUSION

Beowulf is primarily about a hero and heroism. This is hardly a debatable point, but there is a great deal of controversy about the poet's attitude toward his characters and about his moral judgment upon their ideals, their values, and their actions. Opinions on the poet's ultimate purpose range from that which sees the poem as presenting the essential weaknesses of heathen heroic society, to that which sees in the poem the best of a pre-Christian heroic society. The poet certainly does portray, as in Unferth and Heremod, both evil characters and evil actions, but these are contrasts to illuminate the good characters and good actions; so that though there is no development of character, by the end of the poem we have a full picture of an ideal hero. The poet does not present his subject-matter through objective linear narration; the poem is not merely a series of sequential events, although the original folk-tale undoubtedly was. The poet used his subject-matter to fashion something other than an heroic lay or a folk-tale, with the result that the three fights occur primarily as examples of heroic attitudes. The three fights are held up to view, turned around in the poet's hand, and seen from several angles.

There is little or nothing that is mere ornamentation, and as Leyerle points out, there are no digressions. Certainly, if the main events are extracted from the total design, most of the other materials will be seen as digression, but this approach does not take into account the way in which the poet has presented his subject-matter.

As we have seen, the poet very carefully introduces his hero, not as a solitary figure above the whole of mankind, but as a loyal thane of the famous and historical Hygelac; he comes to the Danish court as a stranger, and as the Danes come to know him, so do we. His virtues and ability to fight the monster are not set out at once, but are revealed through dialogue and action: the main events are recounted in such a way that even more is revealed about the nature of these heroic deeds and therefore of heroism itself. The "curiously trivial" plot is more meaningful, even for the modern reader who does not expect he will ever meet such monsters, than it would have been as a folk-tale. The poet's delay in naming his hero, until he is called upon to identify himself for the Danish king, is only one of many means by which we are led to believe in Beowulf. Our "suspension of disbelief" is aided by the poet's realism of presentation throughout the poem, and by his friendly attitude toward these pagan characters. He is convinced of their goodness, and in presenting this he reveals their full character as individuals. Among them Beowulf stands out as the perfect individual, combining the kind of wisdom which makes Hrothgar

a good king with the kind of strength and courage which has made Hygelac famous. That the poet wished to present Beowulf as the ideal hero, both as a retainer and as a king, is evident in his selection of materials and his emphasis on virtues revealed.

The obvious difference between Hrothgar and Beowulf is that the one was helpless against the terror of Grendel, and the other not only defeated him, but performed the task single-handed and unarmed. And however wise Hrothgar may be, Beowulf shows a great deal of political wisdom in his distrust of the kind of peace between the Danes and the Heathobards arranged by the marriage of Hrothgar's daughter and the Heathobard prince Ingeld. Hygelac, on the other hand, is closer to our idea of Germanic warrior-kings. His raid on the Frisian coast, mentioned five times in the poem, ended his life and placed the Geatish nation in a dangerous situation. He is remembered by the messenger for not giving frætwe to his noble warriors [2919], and for incurring the enmity of the Merovingians. No such complaint can be laid against Beowulf---he has destroyed his only enemy in his fifty-year reign, and has won for his people the great treasure-hoard.

The poet's Christian spirit of helpfulness and charity is certainly not confined to the so-called Christian passages, but is revealed throughout the poem. Beowulf in particular among the characters is presented with virtues that merge Germanic heroic ideals with Christian thought; and yet his blend of helpfulness, love of kinsmen and lord, generosity and other qualities



are used in the poem to dignify human life rather than to point a path to eternal salvation. The magnanimity of the hero is ever-present, and is measured against the inadequacies of the lesser characters. Beowulf's physical strength is Germanic, but his use of it, or his moral strength is, according to the poet, what really makes the difference between Beowulf and other men. In his description of epical action Paul Goodman<sup>1</sup> finds that heroic exploits flow from the essential virtue of the hero; and such is the case in our poem. The poet's main concern is to reveal the full character of Beowulf, and the three fights are thus the crowning points in his life. The last lines of the poem celebrate, not fighting, but the civilizing force of his character and the gentleness of his bearing:

Swa begnornodon Geata leode  
hlafordes hryre, heorðgeneatas;  
cwædon þæt he wære wyruldcyninga  
manna mildust ond monðwærust,  
leodum liðost ond lofgeornost.

NOTES

1. Paul Goodman, The Structure of Literature, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1954, p. 125.

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