

Beowulf: pagan values tied with christianity

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



The poem titled *Beowulf* was composed sometime between the seventh and tenth century in a language that is known as Anglo-Saxon. It incorporates many pagan themes and concepts, yet it also contains many references to Christianity. Although paganism and Christianity can be seen as unlike, the two aspects are brought together by the poet in order to show the need for grouping. The pagan themes, such as fate or the common goal of fame and heroism, raise questions in the religious community that could be misleading or misinterpreted without the Christian insight provided in the text.

As a result, it is clear that this combination of pagan concepts and Christianity shown in *Beowulf* is for a Christian audience. In order to enhance the value of the poem *Beowulf*, the author reconciles pagan concepts such as fame, vengeance, and fate with Christianity. The pagan concepts play key parts in the storyline and are related to the components of Christianity in the poem. One of the pagan concepts depicted in *Beowulf* is fame. Other ancient texts, such as *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, show warriors who venture out far from home to accomplish heroic tasks and build fame.

The poem shows *Beowulf* and other characters in the story to have the same urge. *Beowulf* is shown early in the story as “the mightiest man on earth, high-born and powerful” (p. 15). The concept of fame is very important to him and to his people. After hearing of Grendel and his strength, *Beowulf* declares “to heighten Hygelac’s fame and gladden his heart, I hereby renounce sword...: hand to hand is how it will be, a life-and-death fight with the fiend” (p. 31). He wants to maximize not only his own fame but the fame of his king.

He will fight Grendel equally matched and “ perform to the uttermost what your people wanted or perish in the attempt, in the fiend’s clutches” (p. 43). The pagan concept of fame is accomplished when Beowulf defeats Grendel and gives the arm of the creature to Hrothgar. Beowulf has proven his skills and strength by ridding the land of Grendel and Hrothgar praises him by stating, “ You have made yourself immortal by your glorious actions” (p. 63). Although the idea of fame at this time conflicts with certain notions of Christianity, the author reconciles the two by adding many references to God with the achievement of fame.

The author is able to attribute both Christian concepts and heroism to God through the dialogue of Hrothgar. When Hrothgar arrives in the mead-hall the morning after the slaying, he first thanks God by saying, “ let the Almighty Father be thanked...the Heavenly Shepard can work His wonders always...” (p. 63). He praises Beowulf and states that the killing of Grendel was accomplished “ with the Lord’s assistance” (p. 63). Another example of the ties between God and fame is when Hrothgar gives his speech to Beowulf over the dangers of power. He tells the story of Heremod, a king who eventually loses everything due to selfishness, to Beowulf. Almighty God had made him eminent and powerful and marked him from the start for a happy life... a change happened, gave no more rings to honour the Danes... he suffered in the end...his life losthappiness” (p. 119). The story shows that God is the true beholder of power and when man strays from Him, or lives a life of no values, He has the power to take away happiness and power. The only way to live on earth is through the grace of God. Consequently, the pagan concept of fame ties back to God and is reconciled to Christianity.

Another concept of paganism found in the poem is the concept of vengeance.

The first sign of vengeance comes clear when Grendel's mother becomes aware of Grendel's death. She is infuriated and "desperate for revenge" (p. 89). She had no interest in the Danes or Geats until the death of her son. She goes to the mead-hall, kills Aeschere, and takes back Grendel's remaining corpse. This anger and desire to avenge Grendel's death also leads to her eventual death when Beowulf meets her at the mere and kills her with the mystical sword. After killing Grendel's mother and resurfacing to land, Beowulf tells his men, "if God had not helped me, the outcome would have been quick and fatal" (p. 15). The author seems to imply that latching onto anger and vengeance leads to the destruction of oneself. It can also be interpreted that Beowulf was aided by God to destroy Grendel's mother due to her fixed desire to wreak havoc and revenge on the mead-hall. This can be seen as the authors attempt to reconcile vengeance with Christianity. Another example of vengeance can be seen when Grendel's mother kills Aeschere and Hrothgar mourns over his death. Beowulf tries to console Hrothgar by saying, "Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning." (p. 97).

This shows the importance of avenging the death of one's comrade or friend to Beowulf and also the contrast between vengeance and Christian belief. After Beowulf finishes his boast, Hrothgar "sprang to his feet and praised God for Beowulf's pledge" (p. 97) This is another attempt by the poet to reconcile the pagan concept of vengeance with Christianity. The desire to seek vengeance is discouraged through Christianity, and in the case of

Grendel's mother, can result in the destruction of oneself. Although, the question rises as to why Beowulf wasn't corrected for seeking vengeance on Grendel's mother.

This is where a third pagan concept is seen in Beowulf; the pagan concept of fate. The pagan concept of fate in Beowulf is mentioned in association with good and bad fortune. For example, when explaining Hygelac's death, the author states " fate swept him away because of his proud need to provoke a feud with the Frisians" (p. 85). The use of fate in this context refers to bad fortune due to Hygelac's desire to stir up a confrontation with the Frisians. At an earlier point in the story, Beowulf tells Hrothgar, " no need to lament for long or lay out my body: if the battle takes me...Fate goes ever as fate must! (p. 31). Here Beowulf leaves the decision to fate, which is a concept of paganism, but there is no mention of fate being controlled by God. This is in direct conflict with Christianity and the author does not associate fate with Christianity in other portions of the text. For example, when Beowulf is declaring his formal boast to kill Grendel, he states, " And may the Divine Lord in His wisdom grant the glory of victory to whichever side He sees fit" (p. 47). This example shows Beowulf's demonstration of his Christian beliefs and acknowledgement that it is ultimately up to God who will win the fight.

After the fight with Grendel's mother, Beowulf makes another declaration of fate when he states " it was hard-fought, a desperate affair that could have gone badly; if God had not helped me, the outcome would have been quick and fatal" (p. 115). Beowulf surrenders himself to God and is fully aware that his fate was left to God's will. Beowulf once again shows his belief in not only the pagan concept of fate but in God as well. Therefore, the author has

successfully reconciled fate with Christianity. In order to enhance the value of the poem Beowulf, the author reconciles pagan concepts such as fame, vengeance, and fate with Christianity.

These concepts are seen all throughout the poem and act as representation for the relationship between pagan concepts and Christianity. Although in some areas the two aspects of Anglo-Saxon life can be seen in conflict, as in the pagan concept of vengeance, the two seem to be interrelated. Although Beowulf is an epic narrative, it is full of Christian elements that show the beliefs of Christians today venture back in time to as early as the seventh century. Christian customs, such as man believing in God and the presence of good in the world, make this pagan story into what is now believed to be a primary Christian story amongst many.