The fusion of the pagan and the christian essay example

Experience, Belief

In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Paul stands up during a meeting at the Areopagus, in Athens, and begins to speak to them about a statue he had seen while he was walking around the city. While many of the objects of worship had the name of their god or goddess on them, one was labeled " to an unknown god" (Acts 17: 23). He uses this object to open the discussion of the God of the Hebrew and Christian faiths with the Athenians – people who worshipped a whole spectrum of deities, many of whom behaved like adolescents given too much power in the universe. In stark contrast, this god that St. Paul presented " does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17: 24-25). Whether this statue was actually built with the God of Abraham and Isaac, and the Father of Jesus Christ, in mind, is questionable; what is certain is that St. Paul connected the worship of the Greeks with his own beliefs to produce a powerful message that ended up persuading some to believe in his God (Acts 17: 34). When one runs into elements of Christianity in stories from cultures that did not have enough knowledge about the religion to be able to clearly discuss the faith, one possible response is to refer to those elements as " crudely tacked on." However, another possibility in this sort of literary situation is to credit God with having provided divine inspiration – as J. R. R. Tolkien, among others, does in his reading of Beowulf. The correct interpretation of these elements of Christianity is that they are the fruits of inspiration, taking root in the text.

Before turning our full attention to the text of Beowulf, it is worth pausing to make note of the context in which the story was written. An unknown poet

created this story around 700 A. D.; the vast majority of Christian believers at that point attended religious services that were conducted in a language they did not understand (Latin). The Bible was not a text that they could even read; it was a tool that their religious leaders used, and interpreted for them. Their job was simply to worship through obedience. The story of Beowulf follows the tradition of Scandinavian theology – not Judeo-Christian. As a result, there is no sense of a final redemption or of eternal salvation, because those elements did not exist in the world view of Scandinavia (Klautau). However, there are powerful elements in the text that do point the reader toward specific aspects of the Christian faith.

Beowulf is not, by any means, an allegory along the lines of Pilgrim's Progress. It is, instead, a myth, which means it is loaded with all sorts of elements that can contradict one another. As Tolkien claims, the myth “ is at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends; who presents it incarnate in the world of history and geography” (15). Myths generate emotions and a sense of reality that people who only use logic cannot understand; instead, one must approach myths by thinking like a poet. While allegories have meanings that are easily boiled down to a simple statement that teaches a helpful lesson to the reader, myths have meanings that are more complex, susceptible to change with each new semiotic level that is imposed upon it. It is true that Beowulf’s own birth has circumstances similar to that of Christ, in that “ god sende folce tó frófre·” (I. 13-14), intending Beowulf as a comforter, much as the Messiah would be. However, while one might approach John Bunyan's story

of Christian from a variety of perspectives, the lesson of his encounter with, say, Mr. Worldly Wiseman, will not change significantly from reader to reader. However, the encounter between Beowulf and Grendel creates a variety of responses, based on the set of experiences of the individual reader. This complexity of responses is what separates myth from allegory.

One of the elements of Christianity that is said to appear in Beowulf is the fight against pure evil. The dragon in this story, that " with unhaelo, grim ond graedig," (III. 5-6) is the representative of evil; " faéhðe ond fyrene· wæs tó fæst on þám," (II. 22) meaning that he had developed a taste for the aftermath of violence. The dragon also represents evil outside the Scandinavian context, as there is a dragon that is the same color as fire in the Book of Revelation. In Beowulf, of course, the king dies after having defeated evil, because of the wounds that the battle exacted: his neck was clenched " biteran bánum·"(XXXVII. 90). This wound did not keep Beowulf from producing the fatal blow, but he had help from a noble kinsman. The fact that " ferh ellen wræc" (XXXVIII. 13) gives the story a great deal of its virtue, highlighting the role that courage played in the Scandinavian ethical system. This reflects truths in the Christian faith; in order to overcome Satan, Christ has to die, in order to atone for the sins of humanity. However, because his death is that of the innocent, he can come back from the dead, and lead the way to eternal life. This differs from the set of beliefs that is the cultural source of Beowulf – in Scandinavian faith, the greatest ending for one's life was to receive honor and glory by resisting the call of cowardice when facing a death that was certain. In the world after death, the warriors

would come again – and all would fall, even the gods. The honor was not in reaching a heaven (or even the Elysian Fields that ambiguously welcomed the Greek heroes), but in being in that final fight, and lasting until (almost) the very end (Klautau). Even so, Beowulf is honored by “ gewyrcean beorhtne æfter baéle” (XXXIX. 50-51), as with so many other heroes.

Not all of the doctrines that appear in Beowulf also appear in Christian belief. For example, the dogma of courage is strictly Scandinavian in nature. After all, the notion that the greatest ending to one's existence is to be resurrected from the dead, only to die alongside the gods in the final conflict of time, does not make sense for a number of reasons. However, the importance of a character trait such as courage for the Scandinavian believer can be seen in parallel with the respect for other virtues, such as strength, moderation and justice – using the idea of courage to reach those virtues. These three ideals are commonly considered to be crucial to the maintenance of a viable Christian faith – not just by modern theologians, but going back as far as the writings of Augustine of Hippo – and even the writings of St. Paul (Orchard). The dogma of courage is not just useful for setting up a Stoic acceptance of a guaranteed banishment to the great beyond. Instead, it is also useful for committing to a life of self-discipline and a to justice for others – two of the key elements of the Christian faith.

One of the elements of the poem that seems most like a hamfisted attempt to spray paint this epic with a Christian patina is making Grendel into a descendant of Cain, who was the “ ángan bréþer, fæderenmaége hé þá fág gewát morþre gemearcod mandréam fléön· wésten warode” (XXX. 11-13) –

the first murderer in the Old Testament, who kills his brother, Abel, because of a matter of simple jealousy over God's choice in accepting sacrifices, and then is exiled to wander the wilds of the earth. Rather than looking at various parts of the story and considering them clumsy, though, it is also possible to look at this work as the result of an integration between faith and myth. It is important to consider that Beowulf's pagan beliefs can line up, in certain areas, with the monotheism of Hrothgar that asserts the existence of one unique God. After all, the monsters and giants that appear in Beowulf are not completely alien to the Judeo-Christian pantheon. In Genesis 6, there is a reference to the " sons of God" coming to earth, taking wives, and having offspring that were more than human; there is hardly any reference to these beings anywhere else in the Scriptures. These sorts of stories, of legendary monsters wandering the edges of civilization and threatening those who stray too far away, appear in some shadowy form in every culture. As Tolkien puts it, "[i]n Beowulf, we havean historical poem about the pagan past, or an attempt at onea poem by a learned man writing of old times, who looking back on the heroism and sorrow feels in them something permanent and something symbolical" (26). Tolkien considers the writer of Beowulf to have " broughtfirst to his task a knowledge of Christian's poetryand specially Genesis[and] a considerable learning in native laws and traditions" (27). In other words, Tolkien might well have considered calling the writer of Beowulf a pagan to be analogous to calling John Updike a believer in the Norse tradition, because of his writing about those superstitions in Gertrude and Claudius, his recreation of the story of Hamlet. It is the lingering power of the story of a pagan people's heroism and sorrow that makes that story worth

recording for posterity, in other words. In so many ways, the early Christian tradition would adopt elements of Greek and Roman culture and philosophy. Here, this early Anglo-Saxon myth takes elements from the Scandinavian way of thinking, having found its common points with the early outgrowths of Christianity. The overall sensibility is something that is lasting – and also figurative. The truth, of course, can take on a number of guises, but this story shows the reader monarchs who are to be obeyed – those whom God found and called to exhibit those virtues that point the way toward redemption, toward living out the law that He has written indelibly on all of our hearts.

In The Last Battle, which brings C. S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia to a close, Aslan brings Narnia to an end, saving those people who had believed in him to the last. As some of Aslan's chosen are making their way through the green fields of salvation, they come across a soldier who had fought against them, in the army of Calormen, in the final conflict. Puzzled by this, they question Aslan about this man's inclusion on the day of reckoning. The answer that they receive is that Aslan had used that man's honest worship of a false god to teach him lessons about his own true nature, so that he might find his way to redemption on the last day. There are elements of God's truth throughout every time period of history and every culture that has been on the earth. No fusion is crude, according to this way of seeing; instead, one can marvel at the many signs and pathways that lead to God's Kingdom.

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