

Synthesis of christianity and paganism in beowulf

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Old English texts were written in a period when the English civilization was in the progress of converting to Christianity from their previous Pagan beliefs. Hence poetry such as Beowulf contains a blend of elements from Christianity and the Pagan culture. In the transcription of Beowulf, the narrator incorporates Christian connotations in a story that is manifested from a pagan-centric period. Thematically and stylistically Beowulf expresses the standards and ethics of pagan beliefs with a combination of biblical influences which are prominent all through the poem. Several actions of the characters and incidents in the poem illustrate the ideals of Germanic heroic folktales and legends. The ethical code demonstrated by the characters is a manifestation of the pagan concepts of fate (wyrd), vengeance to adversaries, and loyalty to kinfolk. Nonetheless, the poem is imbued with Christian ideals converting the supernatural elements from the mythical account of heroism and bleak fatality into an allegory of faith. In the poem, Beowulf is presented as a virtuous champion and symbol of righteousness against the tribulations of darkness and malevolent forces. Similarly, he is also demonstrated as the pagan valiant ideal of a legendary and heroic warrior. Throughout the poem, the epic tale blends the pagan ideals of vengeance, feuds, fate, and pride with Christian elements and the will of God.

Christian elements are illustrated in Beowulf through biblical allegories and references of God, creation, hades, and heaven. From the introduction, the poem asserts several references to God through phrases such as “ glorious Almighty” (Beowulf 17), “ Creator” (106) “ The Ruler of Heaven” (1555). Furthermore, the poet links the narrative of the biblical Cain to Grendel’s

ancestry origin illustrating the Christian inclination of the composition. “Beowulf is doubtless almost exclusively Christian in tone and attitude” (Tietjen 159). Hrothgar’s anguish under the ravages of the monster Grendel is parallel to the biblical narrative of King Saul’s endurance of the giant Goliath. Moreover, Beowulf defeating Grendel in the battle and returning with the weapon and the head as a token is a reference to the encounter of David against Goliath. King Hrothgar is portrayed in several situations recognizing the will of God and offering his acknowledgment of the Christian faith. However, pagan elements are extensively illustrated in the poem, the poet’s introductory Christian based discourse takes a turn when he asserts the Danes’ idol worshipping at Pagan shrines.

Beowulf expresses a blend of the Pagan concept of fatalism and the Christian construct of God’s favor and will. The poem entails constructs both of a capricious entity or force whose interactions with men are not linked to their worthiness, and of a munificent Christian divinity that bestows guidance and grace to the earnest (Tietjen 161). Throughout the poem, the pagan construct of fate is constantly blended with the idea of God’s will. At particular moments, Beowulf believes in influencing his fate through bravery whilst the poet or characters such as Hrothgar, even Beowulf himself, also attribute his triumph to God’s will. Beowulf says “...for undaunted courage/Fate spares the man it has not already marked” (572-73) expressing the pagan concept of fate or *wyrd*. Later during the battle, he asserts “ So may a man not marked by fate/easily escape exile...by the grace of God” (2291-93) which further illustrates the Christian element in the poem. The concept of the Christian God is that man has free will and His favor governs

his future and not fate. The pagan concept of fate is illustrated in the end as being responsible for Beowulf's pre-destined death as he declares his acceptance of his fate in the last discourse (Tietjen 162). However, the contrast between God's will and fatalism is shown through God granting liberation to Beowulf's people following his death. On the other hand, Beowulf further illustrates the pacific co-existence of both concepts through Hrothgar forewarnings to the hero about the drawbacks of pride by explaining the roles of fate and God (Tietjen 164). The interweaving of both values in the poem results in the narrative possessing a mixture of both pagan and Christian elements.

Through its characters, Beowulf shows Christian faith and divine influences within the pagan Germanic life-force turning the poem into a predominantly Christian narrative. The characters in Beowulf seek guidance and safety from God in their endeavors as He is the one they thank for favors and request bequeathed (Tietjen 164). Despite the fact that the poem possesses Pagan elements, the Christian influences supersede them. Beowulf is viewed as a Christ-like symbol whose attributes of self-sacrificing, loyalty and saving the Danes from the symbol of evilness and the devil, Grendel, express Christian values. Beowulf is presented as a God-sent savior to cleanse Heorot and together with King Hrothgar, they acknowledge God's authority (Goldsmith 3). He glorifies God for his formidable abilities against Grendel's mother, he acknowledges that the aftermath would have been lethal if God had not intervened. Similarly, the majority of Hrothgar's discourses refer to God's will and Christian metaphors. Following the Grendel battle, Hrothgar expounds on the greatness of the Lord and the deliverance God bestowed upon the

people of Danes through Beowulf. Both Beowulf and Hrothgar express their Christian inclination as they often speak as believers in the one true God (Brodeur 196). The poem attributes the source of the hero's astounding strength and misfortunes to the faith in the Christian deity. In spite of the spiritual allegories of Hrothgar's discourses and Beowulf's gratefulness to God's will, the text still holds the underlying pagan principles. Conversely, Beowulf's traits also waver between the virtues of Christianity and the Pagan ideals.

Pagan elements manifest in Beowulf through the titular character's other attributes of vengeance, feud, desire for fame, and pride. Beowulf is referred to as "The warrior determined to take revenge/for every gross act Grendel had committed" (1577-78). Vengeance and feud were attributes that were encouraged and glorified in the pagan Germanic culture. Beowulf and the kinfolds displayed the duty of vengeance to their enemies contrary to the biblical teachings to forgive and show love to our adversaries. Furthermore, the titular character is also shown as pursuing and having the desire for fame (Goldsmith 11). Beowulf is portrayed as the exemplary heroic warrior in the pagan culture and is seen seeking earthly fame over eternal deliverance in God (Tietjen 171). The poem demonstrates his obsession with earthly possessions as according to the pagan culture of presenting tributes to the kinfolds and warriors. Additionally, Beowulf illustrates the aspect of pride which was considered an important element of an individual's character in the pagan society. The Christian virtues would deem boasting sinful as demonstrated by Hrothgar's warnings towards Beowulf about the sin of pride while presenting him with gifts. According to the Christian virtues pride

comes before destruction, the poet asserts Beowulf was too proud in his last battle to consider the dragon a threat. Subsequently, his vanity of not taking into account his own age and being accustomed to triumphing leads to his own destruction.

Despite the predominant Christian discourse, pagan aspects of epic folktales are also principal within the poem. Beowulf essentially being a Christian narrative, the pagan spirit plus subjects and circumstances descending from pagan eras remain apparent (Brodeur 183). Beowulf's superhuman exemplifications and heroism in his battles against evil monsters are reminiscent of pagan heroic tales. For instance, the choice to fight without ordnances and only rely on his splendid strength, subsequently his strength manages to rip apart the creature's extremity. In general, Beowulf is demonstrated throughout the poem as blending both pagan attributes and Christian virtues in his character and battles.

Beowulf's synthesis of pagan and Christian elements is a reflection of a period in which the ideals of the pagan age were alleviated by the placidity of the new faith. In the poem, the pagan aspects of the epic tale both conflict and blend seamlessly with the spiritual discourse of Christianity. The Christian influences are ingrained within the poem's pagan texture that the characters both exhibit virtues and notions from both constructs. The titular character is exhibited as possessing the pagan ideals such as vengeance, pride, and desire for fame whilst demonstrating Christian virtues of self-sacrifice, seeking guidance and favor from God. Further pacific co-existence of both constructs is exhibited through the interweaving of the pagan ideal of

fate and the power of God's will. However, the conflict between the two elements is chiefly shown through King Hrothgar's pure devotion to the Christian God and the people of Danes' pagan inclinations. Furthermore, Beowulf wavering attributes back and forth between pagan and Christian ideals create a prevalent juxtaposition throughout the text. The poem aims at setting the Christian elements as a commentary on the aspects of the pagan Germanic culture during this period.

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