

# Compare contrast the settings of beowulf and hamlet in demark



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## **Compare/contrast the settings of beowulf and hamlet in demark**

Beowulf and Hamlet in Denmark At first glance, one might think that very little connects the stories of Beowulf and Hamlet. One is a pre-literary legend of heroic combat that originated in the oral tradition, and the other is an English Renaissance retelling of a Scandinavian legend, concerned predominantly with court intrigue and existential crisis. What links them is their common setting, Denmark. What could possibly happen in a nice, quiet country like Denmark? [rhetorical question] Quite a bit, if literature is to be believed. The legend of Beowulf comes down to us from the oral tradition, known only through a single surviving manuscript. (Slade) Hamlet was written by William Shakespeare (1564-1616), noted Elizabethan playwright and poet. Shakespeare's Hamlet is usually thought of as more canonically established, but in fact comes to us through three different versions, which may just come from actors' recollections of the play, putting them also in the oral tradition. [parallelism] The play was first performed in either 1600 or 1601, but not printed until 1603, hence the murkiness of the versions. Of course, William Shakespeare put his own extraordinary spin on the story, though some seem to enjoy arguing whether he actually did, but that lies outside the scope of this paper. [allusion] Beowulf is the legend of a great warrior, " wild and furiously battle-fierce" (Slade, line 1564), who saves Denmark from the depredations of a dreadful monster known as Grendel, by defeating the creature and its mother in single combat. The mother has been portrayed as a nubile young woman in recent film adaptations, but in the original is quite authentically and terrifyingly monstrous. Hamlet is the tale

of a prince dispossessed, his uncle usurping his father's throne, and the prince's quest to win that throne back by whatever means necessary.

[Another allusion] (Shakespeare) Two very different stories, yet set in the same nation. Beowulf has a structure almost akin to a horror film, as the seemingly-invulnerable monster Grendel feasts upon the mightiest warriors of the Geats with impunity. They need Beowulf, his name an amalgam of bear and wolf, almost onomatopoeic in its manliness, to defeat the creature. This is a Denmark that is full of warring tribes, primitive people at the mercy of a hostile natural environment. Grendel is that environment made manifest [personification], the horrors of the natural world literally invading the Geats' sleeping hall, piercing their fragile bubble of civilization. "God's wrath he bore, the vile ravager," says one reference to him, implying his representation of the natural order. (Slade, line 710) Further evidence that Grendel is a personification of malign nature comes from the fact that simply killing the beast does not solve the problem. "Grendel's mother, lady troll-wife, remembered misery." (Slade, line 1258) His mother becomes the new threat, demonstrating that there is a family, an ecosystem of monsters.

[symbol] There is always another one, and the monsters will come as surely as the seasons turn and the sun rises. Hamlet is set in a far more civilized vision of Denmark, a place as urbane and cultured as a New Yorker cartoon.

[Simile] Troupes of actors wander the land freely and safely, or visit "about the court" (Shakespeare, act 3, scene 1), and the only threats are from other humans, not monsters. Ironically, being more civilized does not make the

land any safer. [Irony] The armies of Norway, led by Fortinbras "of unimproved mettle hot and full" (Shakespeare, act 1, scene 1) are invading, a human threat even greater than Grendel was. Likewise, half the characters

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in the play are, at any given point, plotting to murder the other half. Danes still can't sleep safely in their own castle, and no monster is required. This, then, is the key difference between the two representations of Denmark in the two texts under discussion. Between the time of Beowulf and the time of Hamlet Denmark became a more tamed nation, less of a wilderness. Left alone with no Grendel stalking the night, humans had to create their own monsters, a task for which Danes are as well-suited as any other human beings. Creating monsters has always been a forte of our species. [anecdote] I've never had much difficulty thinking of humanity as the source of monsters. My family went on a trip when I was a child, and one night we were driving on a dark road, a pretty scary place. I was quite young and I should have been asleep, but I stayed awake, which is how I noticed the ghost outside the car. The ghost had a stretched, horrible, semi-transparent face, and it was staring in the window, somehow keeping pace with the car. I didn't want to say anything, because I was afraid if the ghost knew I'd seen it, something horrible would happen. I was congratulating myself on how brave and tough I was being when my head nodded sleepily, and so did the ghost's. That was when my sleep-addled child's brain realized that I had, in fact, been staring at my own distorted reflection in the window glass. Works Cited Merriman, C. D. William Shakespeare - Biography and works. 16 June 2005. 9 May 2011 . Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. 1 June 1603. 9 May 2011 . Slade, Benjamin. Beowulf on Steorarume. 16 June 2005. 9 May 2011 .