

Beowulf, joseph campbell and the hero archetype



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The foundation text of English literature, titled *Beowulf* (meaning “man wolf” when translated into the modern language), presents readers with a hero named Beowulf who fights three different battles, each with its own monster. Beowulf’s first battle awaits him when he travels to present-day Denmark to save the Danes from a monster named Grendel that has been wreaking havoc on King Hrothgar’s men. Grendel’s defeat leads to Beowulf’s second battle with Grendel’s mother, who avenges the death of her son. Once Beowulf saves the Danes from the monsters they faced, Beowulf returns home to rule his land until he meets his death in a battle with a dragon, signifying the monster that overcame him. Although Beowulf’s success in battle with his literal monsters would name him a hero in almost any circumstance, Beowulf’s life and the situations that led him to battle fall into place with the same ideals that name him a classic hero under Campbell’s hero archetype, where the hero must have a reason for departure, initiation through his defeat of an enemy, and a return from his journey. Beowulf’s journey of life, which was a battle until his death, relates to humans in the sense that although Beowulf’s monsters were real creatures, every individual faces their own version of a monster that phases them, but are conquered in the end. There is always one monster, however, that one can never overcome. Beowulf presents this monster as the dragon in the poem, which ties into every individual as the monster that has never been conquered: the monster of death.

Campbell’s hero archetype is also known as the monomyth, or hero’s journey, that sets the framework of the traditional, classical hero. It defines a hero by the steps in the journey that the hero takes, which can be analyzed

in three different stages. The first stage of the hero's journey is his departure, which can be further explained by 5 further categories. The first of these five is "The Ordinary World," which explains that the hero must come from an ordinary background, setting the level playing field for all heroes who fulfill Campbell's criteria. It is important that the hero who fulfills Campbell's archetype is an ordinary human in order for readers to relate to the story and identify with the hero. Beowulf achieves this criteria as he is known to be a Geat who lived in present-day Sweden as King Hygelac's thane. He is described as, "of living strong men he was the strongest, fearless and gallant and great of heart" (132-133), implying that Beowulf was an ordinary man except for his characteristics that set him apart from others. The second category within the departure stage is the "Call to Adventure," in which the hero is informed of his need elsewhere. This call foreshadows the change from the character's then-ordinary life to his journey as a hero.

In Beowulf, this criterion is fulfilled when "[the] tales of the terrible deeds of Grendel reached Hygelac's thane in his home with the Geats" (130-131), signifying Beowulf's knowledge of the happenings with the Danes. Following this criteria is the "Refusal of the Call," where the hero doubts his confidence with the challenge. This will cause the hero to refuse the call, but then face a shortcoming where he is forced to go on the journey. This, interestingly, is not completely evident in Beowulf, as Beowulf does not refuse the call to begin with. Much of the reason for his decision to travel to the Danes was because of his pride and reputation, putting him in a situation in which he could not refuse. If Beowulf had refused the call, however, he

would have been faced with shame as he was described to be the “strongest, fearless, and gallant” (132-133), compensating for his incentive to travel in the first place. Because of this, the third criteria of the departure stage is fulfilled, as it can be seen that had Beowulf refused the call, he would have been pushed into seeking out Grendel anyway.

The fourth stage in the departure level of Campbell’s hero archetype is “Meeting the Mentor,” where the prospective hero seeks guidance regarding the journey that he is about to begin. The mentor acts as a counselor who gives advice, re-instills confidence, or presents the hero with weapons that he will need to fulfill the quest. Although this is not seen in the very beginning as “counseling,” prior to Beowulf’s departure, “in the ship’s hold snugly they stowed their trappings, gleaming armor and battle gear” (149-150), meaning that Beowulf received weapons prior to his fight with Grendel, compensating for the lack of guidance he had received. This can also be paralleled by the way that prior to fighting Grendel’s mother, Beowulf was presented with Unferth’s Hrunting in order to kill the mother. This also fulfills the fourth criteria of Beowulf’s departure to become a hero. The fifth and final criteria in fulfilling a hero’s departure is “Crossing the Threshold,” where the threshold is the line between the hero’s ordinary world and the alien world that he is about to enter. This is seen in the poem when Beowulf embarks the ship on his journey to the Danes, acting as if it was a journey that he could not go back on. In the poem, this is described as Beowulf “launched the bessel, the well-braced bark, seaward bound on a joyous journey” (151-152). This symbolizes the threshold that Beowulf crosses to embark on his journey as a hero. The idea of crossing the threshold also

occurs when Beowulf jumps into the lake filled with sea creatures on his way to Grendel's mother's lair, marking the difference between the land is known and unknown. With the fulfillment of these five criteria, Beowulf embarked on his departure journey for the hero archetype.

The second stage to Campbell's hero archetype following the departure level is initiation, where the hero fulfills a series of tests and trials that will qualify him to fulfill his ultimate goal. This initiation can be more personal, such as maturing or gaining self confidence, or physical trials that the hero must endure. Like the departure level, initiation contains a set of criteria that the hero must meet in order to qualify for Campbell's archetype. The first one is "Tests, Allies, and Enemies," in which the hero faces challenges that test him. These obstacles can take almost any form and exist solely to disrupt the hero's journey. In Beowulf, one of the obstacles that he immediately faces is Unferth's challenging of Beowulf's strength prior to Beowulf's fight with Grendel. The poem tells this as, "Then out spoke Unferth, Ecglaf's son, who sat at the feet of the Scylding lord, picking a quarrel - for Beowulf's quest" (382-384). In this section, Unferth taunts Beowulf regarding a swimming match they had previously, ultimately challenging Beowulf's honor. Beowulf overcomes this obstacle by being unfazed by Unferth's comments and by reinforcing hope within the people in completing the ultimate goal. Following this, the bigger and more obvious challenge facing Beowulf is his fight with Grendel, his enemy. Beowulf fights unarmed and defeats him in the end, fulfilling the first criteria of the initiation journey by overcoming the challenges that he had faced during. Succeeding the tests is

“ Approach to the Inmost Cave,” where the hero must cross another threshold into an even greater unknown.

Following Grendel's defeat, Grendel's mother wreaks more havoc on the Danes in order to avenge her son's death, calling for Beowulf's help once again. In order to fight Grendel's mother, Beowulf first enters a lake that is filled with sea monsters that taunt him, described in the poem as, “ the swimming forms of strange sea-dragons, dim serpent shapes in the watery depths, sea-beasts sunning on headland slopes” (937-939). The setting of this lake can be contrasted to Hell, emphasizing Beowulf's crossing into the unknown. The measures that Beowulf takes in order to approach Grendel's mother in the first place adds depth and foreshadows what is to come next, fulfilling the second part of initiation. The third stage of initiation is “ Ordeal,” where the hero must overcome a physical test that will help the world he lives in. The hero often comes close to death and experiences some form of resurrection after overcoming the dangerous task. In Beowulf, it was the defeat of Grendel's mother. The significance of this scene in the text is that if Beowulf had not defeated the mother, he would have died and his kinsmen along with the Danes would have not been able to survive. Beowulf's “ resurrection” occurs when he comes back out of the water guarding the mother's lair alive, which can be juxtaposed to the idea of floating up out of the water when baptized. The fulfillment of the dangerous task and thus the third stage of initiation immediately leads to the fourth, which is the reward from the task. Beowulf's reward for slaying Grendel's mother came in the forms of jewels and treasure from Hrothgar, along with a higher honor and reputation. Immediately following the battle, Beowulf returned with the

sword hilt of Hrunding and Grendel's slain head. With all the criteria fulfilled, Beowulf was ready for return.

The final stage of Campbell's hero journey is return, where the hero returns to where he began as closure of the quest. The first criteria of this stage is "The Road Back," which is opposite of the "Call to Adventure." Beowulf fulfills this stage by traveling back to his home with the Geats with ships filled with treasure from Hrothgar. Beowulf returns home with validation of his confidence and strength to be presented with the name of a ruler after King Hygelac dies. Following "The Road Back" is "Resurrection," where the hero faces his final encounter with death. The battle in itself is a representation of a larger symbol that plays into the hero's overall existence. In Beowulf, this is seen as the final battle between Beowulf and the dragon, which wreaks havoc on the Geats after 50 years of peace. Although Beowulf dies as a result of this battle, the dragon itself was supposed to symbolize death, and the true meaning of the battle would not have been fulfilled had Beowulf survived. The battle alone fulfills the "Resurrection" criteria of the return stage, and Beowulf's death fulfills the final criteria in Campbell's hero archetype altogether, which is "Return with the Elixir." The Elixir is the lesson of death itself, which can only be fulfilled with Beowulf's death. The overall lesson of this battle is that the hero's journey will always and inevitably end with death, and the dragon symbolized the unconquerable monster that every individual will eventually face. Had Beowulf not died, he would not be considered a hero in the first place.

Beowulf's journey to become a traditional hero is non-traditional in the sense that instead of the journey encompassing a quest in which the hero returns

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to live a “ happily ever after,” Beowulf’s journey was the journey of life itself, beginning with his departure to fight Grendel. He was a hero in the journey of life. This can be recognized as the most significant link between the readers and Beowulf: his story is reflective of the battles that people fight every day. Unlike other heroic stories, Beowulf’s connected with me in regards to his battles, especially with the last one being a symbol of death.

As Beowulf himself declares, “ death is not easily escaped from by anyone: all of us with souls, earth-dwellers and children of men, must make our way to a destination already ordained where the body, after the banqueting, sleeps on its deathbed” (1001-1007). The journey of a hero is his journey between life and death, encompassing all of the battles that he had faced to turn him into the character that he becomes when he dies. Beowulf’s journey of the archetypal hero is a representation of individual struggles we face, making humans heroes of our own life. Through Beowulf, we learn that death is the ultimate monster that overcomes us, and the quality of life is determined by the extent to which we live it.