

# Christian vs. pagan approaches in beowulf



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Beowulf was written by a Christian poet around the eighth century. Having been changed a number of times, this manuscript has been observed in the older pagan period, and influence by pagan rituals. There are two different cultures reflected towards Beowulf which, are the Christianity culture and the pagan culture.

Paganism and Christianity are both equally portrayed and expressed in Beowulf. It consists of heroes that are called Anglo-Saxons, who prided themselves on upholding their values of advancement, glory and revenge. Christian essentials are brought into Beowulf and could be taken to another perspective because the poet is Christian. Although Christianity has an effect on Beowulf, it is known still to be pagan as well. The purpose of this paper is to show the significance of Beowulf to understand both the Christian and pagan humanity.

Beowulf's action and characterizations in the pagan view has become a major role in the Christian view as well. Near the second partial of Beowulf, it does not discuss much about the Christianity of the hero (Moorman, 17). The pagans attempted to deny death as a part of life, but they believed it is getting revenge to cause more deaths, for example instead of Grendel's mother mourning the loss of her son she pursues revenge. The author has placed Grendel in a Biblical lineage of evil reaching because of the first murder (Hamilton 309). The Christian poet decides not to reject the pagan customs.

“ The Almighty Judge of good deeds and bad, the Lord God, Head of the Heavens and High King of the World, was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he

who in time of trouble had to thrust his soul into the fire's embrace, forfeiting help; he has nowhere to turn.

But blessed is he who after death can approach the Lord and find friendship in the Father's embrace" (Beowulf, 180-88). According to this quote, the poet felt that God was not a source of help for the pagan ancestors in any type of way. Christianity is the belief of the bible and the aspects of Christianity are exposing in Beowulf. The Old Testament is mentioned a little in the first part of Beowulf more than the second part. The Christianity view clinches death as a part of life unlike pagan.

According to Marie Hamilton in *The Christian Perspective in Beowulf*, "The Christian doctrine of Providence, the conception of God as having governed all races of mankind since the creation, and as bestowing all favors, natural or supernatural, that men enjoy" (Hamilton 310-11). This statement explains the meaning of life and the purpose of human existence. There is a possibility that Grendel is the link to the Bible. The correlation between Grendel and Cain is persistent because they were both known to be alienated from God's favor.

Magic was the connection between Grendel and his mother, which relates to Cain's magic invention (Hamilton 316). The version told to Hygelac does not have Christian references; however Hrothgar's version refers to the action of God's influence. The difference between Hrothgar's Christianity and Hygelac's paganism is not related to a source but they both are thankful for Beowulf's success (Stevick 82). The inaccurate indication of Beowulf's victory

was related to God's influence, but he allowed Beowulf to get back on his feet.

There is still no clear point (83). Grendel's mother and God's relationship is a weak version of God and Grendel's relationship. The relationship of Beowulf and Grendel to God is out of stability because Grendel is more like a foe of God (Stevick 85). Grendel's mother thinks of Beowulf as a bad guy that murdered her son even though he is a hero to others. A victory for God is Grendel's defeat, but Hrothgar rewards Beowulf. Grendel and God's relationship is clear of animosity, but Beowulf and God's relationship is submissive (86). Grendel's death also expressed the Christian influence in Beowulf.

The poet of Beowulf has divided his thoughts between pagan and Christianity. Goldstein says, " Beowulf poet writing is synchronously aware, not only that strength is inadequate and the greatest human wealth valueless when the soul is in jeopardy" (Goldstein 72). The gospels are recalled by the poet to indicate biblical language crosses the poet's mind (89). Although the poet of Beowulf has made the ultimate form that Beowulf is pagan; the poet has tried to omit all the pagan inserts from the poem (Helterman 1). The Anglo-Saxon has helped paganism die down. Beowulf is a poem of the spirit and not homiletic practices. Margaret Goldsmith briefly compares Blake with Beowulf.

Goldsmith draws attention to how the poet's inborn theories about man and the universe, so that the work itself personifies his formation of reality (Goldsmith, 71). The poet as originator of myth and those we take " inbred'

in a psychological rather than a social sense is suggested by Blake's comparison (Helterman, 2). This explains Beowulf as an archetypal character because the archetype may show abundance and if he is an archetypal character; his actions will link to it (2).

DuBois believes that there stems difficulties caused by thinking of the dragon as a symbol rather than another image. In his opinion, he believes a symbol is "more or less arbitrary" simply because a symbol representation of something. DuBois says that "early interpreters of Beowulf tended to read it symbolically, and tried therefore to assign dragon fixed values as though they always belonged to an understood nature myth"(DuBois, 820). DuBois states that Grendel incidentally declared by act and analysis rather than conventional dragon.

Yet the prince of the rings was too proud to line up with a large army against the sky-plague. He had scant regard for the dragon as a threat, no dread at all of its courage or strength, for he had kept going often in the past, through perils and ordeals of every sort, after he had purged Hrothgar's hall, triumphed in Heorot and beaten Grendel (Beowulf, 2345-53).

This section of the poem explains how Beowulf is not afraid of the dragon, so he takes the dragon by himself just like how he fought Grendel and Grendel's mother. It also describes Beowulf being too courage. In *The Christianity of Beowulf*, William Whallon suggests that Beowulf is lightly influenced by Christianity by a well-known apostle in Wessex.

However, he states that there is a growing concern as to which aspects of Christianity are directly related to the story because of the lack of direct

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reference to Christian writings. Most recently, there have been findings of “religious sophistication” in Beowulf.

As Whallon describe it is coincidental and Beowulf is more influenced by folklore, and other writings of that day. The original writing and intricate documents are virtually certain to contain similarities and verbal parallels, and such resemblances as do exist must be searching before they can be named intentional rather than fortuitous (Whallon 85). Whallon believes that the philosophy that dominates epic history, which included monsters and hero, which is exhibited through a quote from Bois that explains the general concept of his philosophy.

“ Beowulf is national integrity, resulting from internal harmony. Grendel and his dam are the Danes’ liability to punishment for weakness, pride, and treachery. The dragon is internal discord, a variation upon Grendel, sapping national strength.” Whallon states the characters in Beowulf know nothing about Christianity but seem to be virtuous.

Moreover that the poet of Beowulf and Hrothgar to be Christians not simply because he thought they were but because of the religious audience they expected such affiliation from a noble man. Whallon mentions that the aggregate bear strong testimony that the poet had an added a touched of modern sensitivity, in its historical time period. Whallon says, “ Danes do show themselves heathen and hopeless.” Then he goes in to explain how Grendel predation that last for twelve years and how the Danes offer vows and Idols.

Whallon finds two explanations from Klaeber's textual notes. One of the explanations that is given says the poet forgot that Danes were to be seen as God-fearing men or the relapse designated from Christianity to "indicate the duress of the rapin from Grendel."

"After Beowulf, a Christian king, has for fifty years ruled over the Geats, They are presumably Christian as well; yet they honor his slain body with a pyre rather than interment. Because the obsequies are favorably recounted, either the poet once more overlooked his original conception, or the Geats of his epic are Christian converts who still find nothing objectionable in conducting the ancient last rites for a singular hero (87)." This statement given by Whallon suggests that the possibility of alarming implications are seen clear.

The epic inconsistency is so grave of religious indifference, the poet was accustomed seeing the burial of Christ and considered creation which Whallons says is the suitable end to the career of Beowulf. Whallons says that there is a reversion of the Danes which the poet has which are intolerable but understandable. "The poet of Beowulf tolerated no similar euhemerism, but there are grounds for conjecturing that he anticipated Snorri in transforming the native gods by the opening verses of Genesis."

The poet of Beowulf writes the strengths and riches. Goldsmith also states that these things are transient however, the greatest human strength he believes is inadequate and human wealth when the "soul is in jeopardy." Goldsmith came to the conclusion that pride and covetousness. He says that the "Christian poet was writing about the human tragedy as he understood it

(Goldsmith, 72).” Goldsmith states that if traditional epic hero is a fundamental Christian poem. This poem is about the heroic life written by a poet who is Christian so therefore; Goldsmith goes on to say that the poem must not drive away from the Christian faith and hope (75-76).

In my opinion, Beowulf is both pagan and Christian because it begins pagan then it has a twist of Christianity. I say that because the poet of Beowulf is Christian and I think that is the reason to why it switches between Pagan and Christianity. However, the poem contradicts the religions presented in the poem. There are several references referring to God in Beowulf. I feel can be both Christian and Pagan depending on the different perspectives of the reader.

Pagan and Christians have both similarities and differences. Pagans do not believe in hell; however Christians believe there is a heaven and a hell is what makes them different. My viewpoint on Beowulf as a character is that he is willing to protect the world against evil with the help of God. Beowulf was known to be influenced by Pagan ideas, but as years and traditions of storytelling are handed down. This story is hard to distinguish whether it is leaning more towards Christian values or more towards pagan values. I would say it is more of a mixture of ideas between them both.

Pagan and Christianity values contain things such as heroism, bravery, good, and evil. This is why I believe that Beowulf is influenced by both Pagan and Christian values. There are a host of different opinions regarding the role of Paganism and Christianity in Beowulf. They each argue a great point, which makes it next to impossible to reach a decisions regarding which role is more



dominant. Although Beowulf has a blend of Christianity and Pagan origins; Christian essentials were familiarized to fit the needs of the Christian population for Beowulf.

The poet did not refer to the Old Testament of the bible as much; however the poet used events and characters of the bible to show a comparison. The story embraces the folklore of the time, and their use of Paganism while still having the ability to hold some Christian content. It's rare blend, makes this instant classic something new and inspirational.

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