

A severed arm and a mother's fury

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



An often-explored trope of both contemporary and classic literature is the utilization of somewhat morbid imagery to further a narrative or perhaps convey an underlying message in a vividly grotesque manner. One such example can be found within the English poem *Beowulf* during a scene where the eponymous character defeats the macabre monster Grendel by tearing his arm off in hand-to-hand combat: "...a tremendous wound appeared on [Grendel's] shoulder. Sinews split and the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted the glory of winning" (lines 815-820). What strikes me particularly profoundly is the specificity with which this inflicted wound is described. The references to tearing sinew and burst bone-lappings provide the reader with a harrowing image of brutality. Today we have a plethora of mediums delineating all manner of barbarism, from frenetic video games such as *Grand Theft Auto* that simply suit the palate of the sadist to serious narrative films such as *Quest for Fire* where violence is used heavily to advance the story. While we may have those and plenty of others, the people of Old England would have relied much more on the significance of violent imagery within written works like *Beowulf*. Emphasis of this aforementioned imagery can be found in the application of the adjective 'tremendous.' The Oxford English Dictionary details the word as follows: "hyperbolically, or as a mere intensive: Such as to excite wonder on account of its magnitude or violence; astounding; extraordinarily great; immense" ("*Tremendous*"). Given that this definition explicitly references violence and that the word 'tremendous' is being used to illustrate a scene of violence, it would be relatively reasonable to deduce that the usage of the word within *Beowulf* was a conscious effort on the part of the writer to create an instance

of peculiar emphasis to grab the reader's attention in a manner not dissimilar to the way Beowulf grabbed Grendel by the arm.

Another occurrence of brutish symbolism in Beowulf might perhaps be found in the scene with "...the hand [Beowulf] displayed high up near the roof [of Hrothgar's hall]: the whole of Grendel's shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp" (lines 832-835). The arm is often seen as a source of strength, take for example the image of a muscular arm used on Arm & Hammer household products. The severing and subsequent display of Grendel's arm can easily be interpreted as a severing of the strength of evil and the display of the prowess of good. A graduate thesis by Scott White of Utah State University suggests that severed limbs in narratives "represent lost humanity" (White vi). Being that Grendel is described as inhuman within Beowulf, the claim made by White holds relevance. Further bolstering this claim is the idea that Grendel's arm on display might also abstractly represent a slow disappearance of humanity and slight presence of savagery in the character of Beowulf himself.

While undoubtedly a noble warrior, Beowulf is still human and thus remains highly subject to certain human desires and feral inclinations. A dissection of Beowulf's macabre elements would be incomplete without bring up Grendel's mother. Contrary to the salaciously sensual portrayal by Angelina Jolie in the cinematic adaptation of Beowulf, the original text details Grendel's mother the way a grindhouse flick would describe its arch-villain: "[Beowulf] observed that swamp-thing from hell / the tarn-hag in all her terrible strength" (Beowulf lines 1518-1519). Much like with Grendel, the poem is describing his mother with inhuman, and in this case, somewhat

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hellish characteristics. Perhaps this is done purposely in order to sharpen further the contrast between good and evil in the poem. What sticks out about this specific passage is the referring to of Grendel's mother as a "swamp-thing from hell." The common assumption of Hell is that it's a place of fire and brimstone where the wicked, wrongdoers, and otherwise unrepentant souls are sent for an eternity of damnation. Not exactly the type of place you'd associate with a creature of the swamp. The writer here is likely attempting to articulate that Hell can exist beyond the standard assumption as a place of pain or the residence of a being that inflicts it. Similarly to Grendel, his mother meets a violent end, though she dies by a blade wielded by Beowulf as "a resolute blow...bit deep into her neck-bone / and severed it entirely, toppling the doomed house of her flesh" (Beowulf lines 1565-1566). Here we have another reference to severance as well as barbarity being implemented as a storytelling device to advance the plot.

Another speculation worth considering and explicating is the idea that Grendel's mother is being personified so voraciously as to violently illustrate the feelings of seething vengeance possessed by a mother experiencing the loss of her child. Take away the thing loved most by a mother and you're left with this love being channeled into savage, wanton retribution. Going back to an earlier point raised about how severed hands can represent severed humanity in literary narratives, Grendel could be elucidated as the hand of his mother. His death represents severance from his mother, leaving his mother completely devoid of even a fathom of humanity and filled to the brim with nothing but vicious hellfire.

Household products, infuriated mothers, and flying limbs aside, perhaps it would be best to tie reference to something with staunch relevance to the period in which Beowulf was written. The Bible states: "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will reign over you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath." (Holy Bible, Ezek. 20. 33). How this relates back to Beowulf is fairly straightforward: Beowulf defeated Grendel with his hands and, later in the poem, became king in his homeland. In the context of this passage, the character of Beowulf could be seen as a parable of God by way of showing the strength of his hand to defeat Grendel while the poem has Grendel serving as a crude personification of evil especially given that the character of Grendel is a descendent of Cain. For those unfamiliar with the Biblical context, Cain was the son of Adam and Eve who killed his brother and was consequently banished by God to a life of roaming. Building off of this discussion of Biblical reference, Beowulf is believed to have been written between 700 and 1000 AD. This is fairly near the time that Anglo-Saxon England began converting from Paganism to Christianity. "The conversion of the Anglo-Saxons...began at the end of the 6th century and was completed [near] the second half of the 7th century" ("Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity"). Given that Christianity was fresh and fervent in the minds of folk at the time, the Biblical elements sprinkled throughout Beowulf appear as more than mere coincidence. While today we have a constantly evolving variety of mediums and storytelling mechanics, the utilization of malformed imagery as a means of striking raw emotion into viewers and readers alike has remained a constant and formidable force throughout the ages. Shock value works far beyond the

concept of brutal violence for the sake of more brutal violence. Whether it be the symbolism behind a severed arm or the twisted, gnarled appearance of something that is supposed to serve as a maternal figure, the elements of shock and horror that permeate Beowulf serve profoundly as a means of using bits and pieces of gruesome details to stick out to the reader and advance the progression of the narrative.

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