

Compare and contrast essay between beowulf and the hobbit

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I just this day finished reading A COMPANION TO BEOWULF by my friend and classmate Ruth Johnson. It was remarkably clear, well written, concise, and chock full of fascinating insights and observations. Let me in particular remark on her last chapter, which concerned Tolkien and Beowulf. I had not heretofore been aware of how large a figure JRR Tolkien loomed in the scholarship of the epic poem BEOWULF, nor what a great influence his seminal essay The Monster and the Critics, had in turning the attention of the academic world from the historical to the literary merits of the poem.

Ruth Johnson makes the argument that Lord of the Rings is an updated version of BEOWULF. No, not the events, but the world, the worldview, the motif, the techniques, and especially the approach toward religion. It is to be noted that many critics faulted Tolkien for not including anywhere in Middle Earth any description or hint of rituals, rites, temples and cults with adorn the vivid backdrops of other works of fantasy.

Except for a few indirect hints that there is a High God somewhere, and angelic powers the elves revere, Lord of the Rings is perhaps unique among fantasies in that there is no mention of the religious side of society or the spiritual side of man. But, of course, Tolkien is not unique: he is following BEOWULF. The poet of BEOWULF (so Tolkien interpreted the evidence) wished to depict his pre-Christian ancestors in the admirable light men are right to have for their ancestors, but without attributing to them a Christian faith they could not have had.

In these modern times, when Christian and Post-Christian struggle for the souls of men, and the popular picture of the Christian is of a book-burner

rather than the preserver of pagan literature, it is often hard to recall the respect with which the Christian imagination held their pagan fore-bearers and preserved their works. One need only open any random page of Dante or Milton, for example, to see the thickly clustered references to pagan myths reflected with considerably more reverence than more modern and sarcastic depictions of the gods of old.

As with Roman Christian and the classical pagans, so with Old English and his Norse fathers, at least in this case. The way the poet of BEOWULF handled the delicate matter of showing the old days and the old ways as noble but, deprived of Christ, doomed, was to pass over the differences in a pregnant silence, and yet emphasizing those cardinal virtues that pagans and Christian alike admire, particularly fortitude and honor. So too here did Tolkien with his Middle Earth and their peoples: the foremost virtue emphasized again and again in Tolkien was the Beowulfian virtue of continuing a fight even after all hope is exhausted.

The melancholy pronouncements of gloom and doom are scattered throughout the War of the Ring, yet also match the elegiac quality of Beowulf's last battle against the dragon of the barrow, and much of the tone in side tales mentioned in Beowulf. The Beowulfian attitude toward fate or 'Wyrd' seems a blend of the pagan notion of inescapable fate woven by the Three Sisters, or the Christian notion of fate as the decree and will of God. A similar attitude might be detected in Middle Earth.

Frodo nowhere lauds the fact that it is his free choice to carry the burden of the cursed One Ring, as, for example, Neo from THE MATRIX does in the

climax of that trilogy. Instead, the wise Gandalf tells Frodo that Bilbo was “meant” to find the Ring, as if by some divine will above and beyond the will of any creature in Middle Earth, even Sauron the Dark Lord. Meant by whom? As in *Beowulf*, it is not said, but the silence implies something like ‘Wyrd’ or the will of heavenly powers.

Tolkien borrowed so much from *Beowulf* and the Old English, that the description of Medusheld (Mead-Hall) in Rohan might be taken as the twin of Hereot. Unferth, who sits at the feet of Hrothgar and scorns *Beowulf* at his first appearing in the great hall, is somewhat parallel to Grima, who sits likewise and scorns Gandalf as a storm-crow and a meddler in others’ affairs. Many readers (include myself) have called *Lord of the Rings* a ‘medieval’ fantasy, but this is a gross misnomer. There is not a single Arthurian figure in Middle Earth, nor any such armor or arms or equipment as might a knight of the High Middle Ages have used.

The men are in hauberks and iron caps, as in *Beowulf*, usually carrying spears. The fantasy is Old English in setting, Danish and *Beowulfian*, England of the time of Alfred the Great; but also the scenes in Gondor might be imagined as if some northern hero visited the great and ancient cities, cities builded of stone and gold, of Rome or great and once-invulnerable Constantinople. The Shire itself is redolent of a high medieval period, some idealized squirearchy, but Rohan is entirely in the mood and atmosphere of *Beowulf*.

In *Beowulf*, the elves or ‘ylfas’ are listed along with ‘ettins’ and ‘orcs’ (elves, giants, demons) as being descendents of Cain, exiled by God for his

kin-slaying (a crime the Norse held in particular horror) and therefore, even as lesser clans must feud and retaliate endlessly, so the Sons of Cain with the race of moral men, descended of Seth and Noah. While the orcs and other monsters in Tolkien are creatures innately evil, no more to be reasoned with nor spared than Grendel, the elves are not quite the Liosalfar of Norse myth, albeit they are more akin to this than to the diminutive sprites of MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.

In olden times, northern people found stone arrowheads, or saw evidence of heart attacks or madness that seemed without cause, and blamed the unseen people, the elves, who were not necessarily cruel and wicked, but they had no concern for the things of men, and went their ways invisibly. Something of this mood is present in Tolkien's elves, albeit he makes them both more manlike, and something like a prelapsarian man still at one with nature, to suit his purposes. The dwarves of Tolkien, on the other hand, could have stepped out of central casting from a Wagner Opera, and the names are taken unchanged from the Eddas.

It may be useful for a moment to contrast the free peoples of Middle Earth with the other fantasies from Tolkien's generation and before, in order to emphasize a point easy to be lost in our modern Dungeons and Dragons generation: namely, that elves and trolls and dwarves are purely Norse and Beowulfish in origin. Tolkien took them from the world of Beowulf and made that world and no other the staple of fantasy worlds. Tolkien made the ylfas and orcs and ettins into the elves and dwarves and trolls we now tend to think of as trite stereotypes of an overly-plowed field.

But you will in vain seek their like in THE WORM OUROBOROS by ER Eddison, nor in LUD-IN-THE-MIST by Hope Mirrlees, nor in anything written by James Branch Cabell nor William Morris nor Lord Dunsany nor Clarke Ashton Smith nor William Hope Hodgson nor William Beckford nor Arthur Machen nor the great Robert E. Howard in any writer in that genre that used to be called fantasy before the coming of Tolkien. These peoples and creatures entered the common imagination from the forgotten north of the world through the pen of JRR Tolkien.

Turning for a moment to the Hobbit, we see the dragon Smaug circled on gold in his buried hold in much the same manner as the dragon of Beowulf. Both are stirred to outrage by the theft of a trifle from their greed-gathered horde, a gold cup. Both rise up in flame and wrath to burn nearby homesteads. It is an entirely Norse conception of a dragon. The dragon slain in myth by Saint George was no hoarder of gold; Nagas of the East and Liang of the Far East are different beasties entirely, albeit called dragons in our language.

One artistic technique the poet of Beowulf used was to interpolate references to even earlier events and sagas into the matter of the poem. Early critics of Beowulf thought this a structural weakness, or even evidence of two or three poets cobbling disjointed earlier material together. But a close attention to the matter perhaps shows the poet meaning to draw out parallels and contrasts between the ancient events and the struggle in Hereot, or the dark mere, or the barrow. It gives the poem, which was meant to be antiquarian at the time it was ritten, a richness of depth, by depicting a

world of many layers of ever receding time. Behind every treasure sword and necklace, there is a tale, and weapons have names and histories even as great households and heroes and the lineages do. Tolkien is often complimented on the richness of the detail, the sense of many ages piled up behind the event in the current War of the Ring; but what he did was to copy Beowulf, and use the same technique, giving names to swords and remarking on the histories of towers and lands until the weight of history settles into the imagination of the reader.

I contrast it with, for example, Homer's *ILIAD*, where the technique is not used. Aside from the armor of Narses, I cannot recall the history of any weapon being recounted among the Greek. It is purely Norse touch. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* seems a real world because so often mention is made of former days and older ways, and the tale is of the passing away of things with deep roots who once stood long in their places.

Finally, the world itself, the Middle Earth, is merely the Old English word for Midgard, the world suspended halfway between the dark of hell and the light of heaven. The melancholy of the passing away of the older world was also a theme in *BEOWULF*, in the ears of the listeners even if we cannot hear it today. The English poet set his tale amid Danish lands and centuries (even at that time) long gone by. The old ways were past, and the new had come. The poet says farewell to the world of Beowulf even as he writes his saga.

In much the same way, JRR Tolkien says farewell to the world and worldview that passed away before and during the Great War in Europe, the death of the days when the world was alive and elves lurked unseen in the twilight,

the death of faith and faithfulness, the passing away of kings and heroes and all things ancient and fine, and the final triumph of the smoggy mediocrity of Mordor. Part of the reason for the fame of his book is that many folk share the sentiment of elegy, and wish, with Professor Tolkien, to say farewell to a world nobler than our own.