

# The first few lines of beowulf

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How much control do we have over our own lives? Do we really have any power over our own fate? Does Gods will triumph over our personal decisions? These are questions that we may ask ourselves today, but have also been pondered since the medieval times and surely long before then. In the epic poem Beowulf, the idea of fate is implicitly prominent. Yet Anglo-Saxons were wrestling with religion when the classic poem was finally transcribed, possibly a century after it was first told.

It is apparent when reading Beowulf that many were grappling with the question of fate versus free will or even Gods will, as the ideas reappear throughout the work. But the theme of fate is so strong that it is obvious that it was a solid force in the lives of the people of this time.

Beginning in the first few lines of Beowulf, the narrator alludes to the incidents of misfortune that are to come for our epic hero. There is an instant feeling of foreboding after beloved leader, Scyld Scefing dies, shut off as fated (26). Later, Fate cast no shadow, although many a man was marked to suffer (1233-1234). Although we as readers are clued in pretty early on that fate will play out in this tale, there are also conflicting Christian references to Gods will.

It is believed that the monks may have been the first to record the poem, so it is hard to know for sure if the Christian tones were added after the fact. Nonetheless, we must take them in to account when analyzing the work. To reference the introduction to the poem again but with a Christian perspective alluding to Gods will to compensate for their leaders death:

To him [Scyld] a boy was born, a baby in the homestead,  
whom God grants us as a gift and comfort  
to ease the people. He apprehended  
dire trouble dogged those destitute people.  
But the Lord of life, Leader of heaven,  
offered them honor, earthly requital. (12-17)

The principal or power of fate is now coupled with religious ideals stating that the Lord of life will honor his people. We will find that throughout Beowulf, whenever any men succeed at accomplishing heroic feats, the narrator is quick to point their great accomplishments to God's favor and His divine plan. Whether this was indeed a subsequent addition by a transcriptionist, as opposed to how the original storytellers felt, we may never know.

Beowulf himself symbolizes a response to fate; his good deeds, such as remaining loyal to Hrothgar and coming to save his town from Grendel, act as an answer to the role of fate. In this poem, fate may justify why particular events have happened altogether. In fact, in Old English the word *wyrd* was used for which events are predetermined, fate, doom, or destiny and this concept seemed to drive the classic work.

In Hrothgar's meadhall, when defending his legendary swimming feat to Unferth, Beowulf says that Fate often saves an undoomed man when his courage is good supporting that he does ultimately believe in a sense of fate and purpose. There is conflict between fate and Gods will, continually at

ends, and the mixing of paganism and Christianity. It seems that Beowulf may regard courage as a possible intervention of fate.

Throughout the poem however, there are countless allusions of God serving as a protector to the warrior. After Grendel's defeat, when Beowulf tells of the battle to his mother, he declares how “ Straightway the struggle would have stopped outright had God not granted the gift of protection” (1657-1658) and thereafter that He [God] has guided abandoned ones and friendless (1663-1664). Despite his obvious skill and self-confidence, Beowulf is clear of receiving God's help, and in turn, prevailing over Grendel.

There is the obvious Biblical connection of Grendel's stated lineage to Cain from the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis. In that story, the two brothers took part in a feud, which ended in Cain killing Abel. Grendel, being descendant of a man who killed his own brother, is a clear representation of evil. One may reflect whether it was his fate to become the villain he was in Beowulf or rather he was a possible symbol of sin. Grendel continues to fuel the struggle between pagan fate and Christian will in the tale.

A tale such as this, told over and over throughout the years is sure to have been open for not only interpretation but also alteration as it went from one scop, or storyteller, to the next. We do know that the initial manuscript was partially damaged in 1731, opening up one more way for the original to have been modified. The fact is that whether or not the unknown author of Beowulf intended a correlation between the concept of fate and God's divine will is something we will never surely know.