

The depiction of the human condition in beowulf



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The peoples to whom Beowulf, a poem of the migrations, belongs, came to England in the fifth century. The early Angles and Saxons knew nothing of any civilization existing in Britain. They discovered it for themselves in the fourth century, and the sea-rovers pronounced it a good land, rich in booty. Soon little kingdoms grew up, first Kent, then Essex and East Anglia and Northumbria. The pirates, changing their modes of life, turned settlers and farmers, and for six hundred years literature is Anglo-Saxon. What did they carry with them into England, these newcomers?

What poetry or history in which no mention is made of England, but which preserved the earlier traditions of the race? The only indisputable specimens of that literature are Widsith, The Lament of Deor, Brunanburh, Waldhere, Finnsburh, and the incomparable Beowulf. In Beowulf, human beings become poetic voice for all lonely and innocent victims of fate, and an apt symbol of the weakness inherent in the human condition. Beowulf faces hostile invasion of the natural world: the overwhelming, unrelenting, nonnegotiable attack of the dragon.

He cannot immerse himself and escape unscathed: engulfed by the dragon's mouth he suffers mortal wounds. In last battle, the inescapable human condition finally reasserts itself so that Beowulf becomes yet another victim of the natural world. One could even argue that, in the end, Beowulf loses his distinction as a conqueror of the natural world's power and is redefined to be the same as everyone else; despite his heroic stature, he, like all human beings, finally must succumb to human condition.

When ancestors came to these shores they were polytheists, whose gods, not omnipotent, though powerful deities, dwelt in Asgard, where Odin, chief of the twelve mighty ones, had his Valhalla, whither he summoned all warriors who fell in battle (Kiernan 68). The constitution of the Saxons was a species of free monarchy. Kingship was of the patriarchal type and the monarch the friend and shepherd of his people. The chief or earl had his followers. Outside the comitatus stood the nation of freemen.

An emotional though fierce folk, warriors all, they were little given to agriculture or the peaceful arts; of many tribes probably, but tribes not inhabiting for long any fixed geographical area. These tribes met and mingled or fought, separated into new groups, for ever in unrest. They were plunderers, when plundering was possible. These men knew no towns – no city or town is mentioned in Beowulf. Thus far the poem is about human condition. In Beowulf readers have vivid pictures of matters familiar in the heroic age of our forefathers, their daily concerns, the things that happened in every hour of their lives.

Their ships and seafaring, their offensive and defensive armour, their political methods and international civilities, their social doings, their streets and houses, their domestic habits, their arts of decoration in hall or on sword or flagon-these are all spoken of with the utmost simplicity, truth, and distinctness (Kiernan 134). Beowulf recreates for readers a society which endured for centuries side by side with the Roman empire. That was a northern society of the aristocratic military type, a society whose chief business was war and plunder.

Yet it made its way towards civility and the arts, and knew the worth, despite its heathen ferocity, of magnanimity and self-sacrifice. The battle with Grendel strikes a new note, the note of pure imaginative work. “ Then from the moor, from under the misty heights came Grendel, striding” (Chambers 104). The fire-forged hinges of the door give way before him. He seizes a sleeping warrior, tears and devours his flesh, and advancing grasps at Beowulf, the hero himself. But a hand-grip, fiercer than any he had ever known, meets his own, and he would fain have fled to his den of darkness.

Then upright sprang Beowulf and straightway grappled with his foe, The struggle grim and great overthrows the ale-benches and the hall resounds with the uproar. Panic seizes the Danes as they hear the din and the terrible cries of the monster. But the unrelaxing grip of the hero at length bursts sinew and bone, tearing Grendel’s arm from the shoulder, and the demon, sick to death, flies to his den beneath the fells. With dawn the victory is bruited abroad, and the young warriors ride to Grendel’s lair, the demons’ mere. There wondering they gaze upon the gloomy waters, seething with blood, proof of the beast’s joyless end.

Then was there great rejoicing and praise of Beowulf. The youths, light hearted, race their horses on the smooth ground. He chants the lays of Sigemund and of Heremod, songs of far journeys and feuds and many battles. Hrothgar, standing at the entrance of the hall, receives the hero, giving him the thanks that are his due. Then song and the sound of feasting resound through Heorot, and Hrothgar’s queen herself, bearing the mead-cup to her lord and Beowulf, adds her words of praise, and gives to him gifts of price, a mantle and ring and collar of twisted gold.

Such briefly and omitting the episodes, which amplify but interrupt it, is the story of the English epic. This is a poem without parallel in the literature of the Germanic peoples. It is eclipsed by few in the narrative literature of the world. Apply the severest tests and Beowulf falls short of true epic greatness in a dozen essentials. It is too short – hardly more than three thousand lines. Yet however and wherever preserved it has far outgrown the limitations of the ballad art and method. There is here style, not indeed the matchless style of Homer.

This is not the language of every day but of makers (Chambers 156). Though much is disputed, it is not disputed that in Beowulf readers possess an authentic heroic lay. It was worked over by a Christian poet, who clearly mirrored the life and mind of pagan Germany, “ the very body of the time, its form and pressure” (Chambers 80). The story falls into three sharply defined parts, each of which is concerned with human exploit. In the first Beowulf slays a monster, which has terribly harassed a Danish king, Hrothgar. In the second he slays a second monster, the mother of the first come to avenge her son.

After these triumphs the hero returns to his own land, becomes the king of it, rules for fifty years, and in his old age, battling for his people, slays, but is slain by, a dragon who has ravaged his realm. Thus the third exploit, related in the third part of the poem, is widely separated in time from the first and second. The first and second are the feats of his youth, the third of his old age (Chambers 67-69). The unity of the poem, it is at once apparent, is not a close-knit unity. It is a unity of the primitive type, achieved simply by relating all occurrences, otherwise unconnected with each other, to a single person.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-depiction-of-the-human-condition-in-beowulf/>

The unity attained in the *Odyssey* of Homer is of the same type, but there a much more complete story or series of stories is knit together with matchless art, an art beyond the skill of the English poet (Irving, 1992, 90). The successive great incidents then in the career of *Beowulf* make the plot. To these others might with ease have been added without adding to the organic or artistic complexity of the narrative, but merely to its length. Yet while this is so, the selected incidents are similar in type and they are appropriate to discover human condition presented.

There move continually across the stage kings, queens, and warriors; a mighty spectacle of vigorous and passionate life-wars, combats, domestic feuds, loves, treacheries, villainies – is revealed. To the makers of *Beowulf*, and to its original audiences, its recital was something far different from a mere tale of superhuman prowess; it was an incantation which made memory leap from its couch of slumber, and revived for its hearers in all its names and phrases a well-known world in which they and their fathers had borne a part (Kiernan 234).

In *Beowulf* similes are few – the ship beginning her voyage is described as “most like a bird,” or the blade of a sword flashes “as when the sun, candle of the firmament, shines brightly in the heavens” (Irving 1968, 89).

Metaphors – the “kenning” or poetic synonym – are on the other hand common – the sea is “the whale’s road” or “the swan’s path,” the ship “the sea-wood,” the sword “the battle-friend”. Still readers have journeyed far from the beginnings. Beyond all this, the external elements of form, there is in *Beowulf* an intellectual wealth and a depth of reflection human condition.

The world upon which this poet looks out is thronged and bustling as the street of a city. The hero foresees too the future, and looks to it with hope or with foreboding – “such is the deadly grudge of men, doubtless the Swedish folk will come against us when they have learned that our king is dead” (Irving 1968, 37). The scene shifts easily from the hall to the galley under sail, from the shore to the moors, from day to night, from winter to spring. There is observation of nature and pleasure in good handicraft, and a Stoic creed of life and honor. In *Beowulf* the conscious poet emerges.

But there is more than this, the high poetic dawn of insight and imagination. Hard the poem of this hardness the interpolated Christian passages afford no real mitigation. “God, doubtless, can stay the fell ravager from his deeds,” readers read in one passage, and again “Him” (*Beowulf*) “hath holy God sent to us, as I trust, to us the West Danes, against the terror of Grendel”. There are utterances, pathetic and penetrating, moving reflections on human condition and destiny that vibrate with truth learnt in the harsh grip of experience. The themes are ancient, no more than the brief glory of man’s strength, the relentlessness of fate.

Now is the flower of thy strength lasting a while—soon shall it be that sickness or the sword, or the clutch of fire, or wave of the flood, or spearthrust, or flight of arrow, or blinding age shall take away thy might” (Irving 1968, 437) Or again: “Now that the leader in war has laid aside laughter, revel, and song, therefore shall many a spear, cold in the dawn, be grasped by the fingers, raised in the hand. No sound of harp shall rouse the warriors, but the dark raven, busy over the fallen, shall send his frequent cry, telling the eagle

how he sped at the feast when, with the wolf, he spoiled the slain” (Irving 1968, 49).

Trite reflections no doubt, but not more trite than those of Homer. For the epic form, as here, envisages human condition; it perceives wide spaces filled with human interests and human figures. The community bond has overpowered that of the family; men and the doings of men, nations and the affairs of nations are the interests of this literature. The epic hero is always a fighter, a soldier in some good cause. In Beowulf he is engaged in a no less holy war with the powers of darkness, the enemies of the whole human race. This is not a war of heroes with other heroes, it is a conflict of man with powers hostile to man.

Nothing can be clearer than that Beowulf belongs to an age in which nature was felt as unsubdued, unfriendly. His race inhabited the narrow lands, the ridge of unceasing war – the unexplored ocean before him. The forest had not yet been cleared nor the protecting walls of the city built. Northern Germany in the pre-Christian centuries can hardly have been a more kindly region than the Central Africa of to-day. The hero in Beowulf stands at bay with Nature, exposed to the attacks of strange, uncouth, silent foes. Neither Grendel nor his dam nor the dragon by whom he is slain make use of any speech.

Everywhere in this poem readers have the sense of a savage and menacing world. Heroic poetry of this order has small concern with ideas. Unlike the chivalric epic, it is desperately occupied with doings. Life is wholly strain and pressure, governed by the simplest emotions, the desire of food and drink, of

treasure and good weapons. There is no room for love-episode or protracted courtship, no place for gentleness. It reads throughout like a stern record of a painful human condition. In this society each group is supporting itself with difficulty against famine, the untamed forces of nature (Irving 1992, 289-290).