

How is the conflict between good and evil portrayed in beowulf

[Literature](#)



of the English Literature (ic and Modern) of the Concerned Teacher 18

September Beowulf- The Portrayal of the Conflict between Good and Evil

There is no denying the fact that the struggle between the good and the evil is a theme that has wrested the human imagination in all ages and times and in almost all major human civilizations. This motif is so pervasive because it pragmatically envelops almost all the facets of human life. The epic poem Beowulf tends to continue and build on the same theme and portrays the eternal and emphatic conflict between the forces of the good and the evil through the rich exploitation of the symbolism associated with the epic hero Beowulf and the monsters and through the Christian and pagan allusions in the poem. While delving on the symbolism inherent in this epic the thing that needs to be kept in the mind is that the good and the evil inherent in Beowulf do not ascribe to the contemporaneous ethical and moral notions, but are rather affiliated to and specific to the cultural and social setting that envelops this poem. Thereby the symbolism inherent in the poem that accentuates the characteristics of the good and the evil characters affiliates to a specific society and culture that defined the moral and historical world in which Beowulf moved about. For instance, Grendel's massacre of the Danes is ethically and morally symbolic of degradation and perversion in the sense that not only it happened to be all pervasive and morbid, but it also happened to be an anathema to the moral codes of a feudal society that valued and cherished loyalty, justice, fairness, honor, community and courage. The other symbolic theme that is pervasive in the poem is that of the light and the darkness. The human civilization represented by the brave warriors like that of Beowulf is symbolized by light. For instance the mead

hall is shown to be resplendent with light, symbolic of human existence and life. In contrast, Grendel's lair is shown as being dark and gloomy and he is shown to be getting out and hunting only in the dark, thereby indicative of festering evil and death. Another attribute that is intimately ascribed to the forces of good embodied by Beowulf in the poem and happens to be emphatically symbolic is the confidence of Beowulf. Throughout the poem Beowulf is shown to be confident of his ability to slaughter and defeat the monsters. In a Biblical context, this confidence has its moorings in an unshakable faith, a faith that is superhuman and godly and discernibly somewhat arrogant and proud. In contrast, Grendel is shown to be evasive and hesitant, that eavesdrops on the mead hall conversations like a sissy child. The other theme that not only resonates the struggle between the good and the veil, but is also historically and culturally contemporaneous to the clime of Beowulf is a rich allusion to the Christian and pagan notions in the poem, which not only highlight the moral code cherished by a feudal society moving towards light, but is also a reflection of the times in which Beowulf was written. For it was a time in which the virtues so dear to a heroic age were being gradually tempered by the mellowness and sophistication of a new belief, an age that happened to be warlike yet essentially Christian in its moorings. For instance the poet mentions that the last time Grendel visits Heorot, he is depicted as being "wearing God's anger (36)." Thereby Grendel happens to be the personification of something that is diabolical and evil. Then the poet intertwines the Biblical evil ascribed to the character of Grendel with the pagan idea of Ragnarok. Ragnarok alludes to the ending of the world when all noble warriors are expected to

profess their allegiance to their god. Thereby, the poet intends to convey to the readers that the sincerities of Beowulf are hinged to goodness and God and that he is fighting for God. The theme continues as Grendel dies, his mother must “avenge the feud (45).” This signifies the Christian notion of the coexistence and continuation of the evil. The readers are also introduced by the poet to Grendel’s mother’s lineage that extends to Cain. The poet fuses the Biblical idea of Cain with the pagan concept of fate to build on the motivations that guided Grendel’s mother. Thereby the rich symbolism and a pervasive use of the Christian and pagan allusions do expansively bring out the quintessential struggle between the good and the evil inherent in Beowulf. Works Cited Raffel, Burton (Translator). Beowulf. New York: Signet Classics, 1999. Print.