

# Examining the story of beowulf religion essay



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After hours of self debate on why the Christian influences in Beowulf slowly die out and eventually cease to exist towards the end of the story; I have come to the conclusion that the monk who rewrote the story was not a full blooded Christian. In this time period, the pagan religion had not been completely dismantled, and it had been around at the same time as Christianity. The monk, I believe, was fighting an internal battle with himself. Two religions clashing inside of him, waging war through the very text he was rewriting. In the beginning of the text he adds heavy amounts of Christian influence but pagan beliefs such as: superhuman strength, revenge, and fate still linger amidst the Christian references. As the story progresses it is clear that the monk's pagan beliefs are beginning to overtake his Christian beliefs.

The beginning of the story through the battle with Grendel contains the largest amount of Christian reference and influence used by the monk and the least amount of pagan influence. The beginning consists of Grendel listening in on the Danes singing about the creation of the earth and man by the almighty ruler or God. He also listens in on them singing about his creation; he is a descendent of Cain, the brother killer, therefore Grendel is forced by God to live a life of exile. The first conflict between religions lies here; Grendel is forced to live a life of exile yet one of the main beliefs in Christianity is forgiveness. It is the Anglo-Saxon pagan belief that once a name is cursed, it is cursed forever. Hrothgars throne being protected by God is another Christian element along with God sending Beowulf to watch over Herot as a savior. It is not until Grendel sneaks back into herot that the

pagan influences start to turn up again. Lines 24 through 27 of "The Battle with Grendel" read:

"Ere morning came, since fate had allowed him

The prospect of plenty. Providence willed not

To permit him any more of men under heaven

To eat in the night-time." (Lesslie Hall 29)

Now fate is showing up in the story, fate being a pagan belief, mixed in with the idea of Divine providence willing that Grendel shall kill no more. Then Beowulf exhibits more superhuman strength when Grendel cannot break his grip and he rips Grendel's arm off; these are more pagan elements. Beowulf is protected by God in this section however. He has come to save the Danes, not seek revenge upon Grendel; Christianity does not believe in revenge. This section of the text was the beginning of the religious battle inside of the monk; this struggle becomes more evident as the story goes on.

Before the battle with Grendel's mother she bursts into Herot and takes Hrothgar's closest friend as reparations for the death of her son. Before Beowulf's descent into the water to find Grendel's mother he gives a speech about fate to the men. Beowulf tells Hrothgar that if fate decides that he will not win the battle, he wants him to be a king to his men and send the jewels that Hrothgar gave to him to Higelac, king of the Geats, to show how generous of a king he was to Beowulf. The monk is walking a tight-rope between religions here. Beowulf being the savior sent by God to save the Danes is now about to take revenge for them; however at the same time he

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is once again helping save them. Paganism comes into play once more here; Beowulf sinks down to the sea floor for nearly the entire day, these are more examples of superhuman traits. Once at the seafloor the monster has the upper-hand on Beowulf it seems; she grabs him and brings him to her lair, she destroys his helmet (which has never been done before) and Unfeath's sword is unable to damage her. It would seem he is fighting a losing battle with Grendel's mother until the monk begins adding more Christian influence to the text. Lines 79 through 82 of "The Battle with Grendel's Mother" read:

"And had God most holy not awarded the victory,

All knowing lord; easily did heaven's

Ruler most righteous arrange it with justice;

Up rose he erect ready for battle." (Lesslie Hall 53)

It appears as if the Monk is assuming that God is allowing Beowulf to live since he is the only man who can defeat this monster and save the Danes again, even though he is fighting the monster for revenge this time. Then once again Beowulf exhibits superhuman traits by picking up the giant sword and cutting Grendel's mother's head off. It would seem that the monk's pagan beliefs are beginning to overpower his Christian beliefs; there is a noticeable difference in the amount of Christian influence versus the amount of pagan influence being used in this portion of the text. The monk is beginning to doubt his faith in Christianity therefore he is adding more pagan elements to the story; for now though he is still using Christian elements to keep Beowulf alive.

Now it has been many years since Beowulf saved the Danes; Higelac has passed away and Beowulf has become king of the Geats. A thief enters the lair of a dragon and steals his treasure; now the dragon begins to terrorize the land and Beowulf hears news of it. There is almost no Christian reference or influence in this section. The monk makes two different pagan references to fate in the same battle. On top of that Beowulf is only fighting the battle for fame to further secure his immortality after he passes on. In previous sections he was set apart from the rest of Anglo-Saxon culture because he was going out of his way to save the Danes because he was sent by God. It would seem that now he is just another warrior set out to kill for fame and treasure. Fate decides against him now when his shield is not strong enough to fend off the dragon's fire and his sword breaks after piercing the dragon's scales. All of his warriors save for one have no faith in him and run away. Compared to the beginning and middle of the text the monk has only used pagan elements here. Beowulf's victory or defeat was based solely on fate; there was no Divine assistance given to him here. Beowulf kills the dragon with his knife but ends up being defeated as well; not before he is brought his treasure by Wiglaf, his follower, and then he tells Wiglaf to build a massive tower that will forever immortalize him. Beowulf gets his treasure and immortality but at the price of his own life. Compared to the beginning and middle of the text the Christian influence has dissolved completely and left the pagan influence to thrive.

It is known that paganism and Christianity were around side by side in this time period. Pagans were being converted to Christians by the Catholic Church and it is a possibility that this monk was a pagan convert. This

possibility supports my theory that the monk may have been balancing upon a razors edge, this edge being the line between religions. The monk was fighting an internal battle between paganism and Christianity and the text was directly affected by this. Whether or not he intended his struggle to be shown in the text he was rewriting we will never know, but it certainly has been. The beginning of Beowulf starts out with heavy amounts of Christian influence and little amounts of pagan influence. The battle of religions begins around the middle of the story when Beowulf battles Grendel's Mother. The end of the religious war comes at the battle with the dragon when paganism seems to have won and leaves Beowulf to die. All we can do is speculate about this monks life; did he lose faith in Christianity or keep his pagan roots? Maybe one day we will finally have the answer to that question.