

The Foes of God: The Role of the Monsters in *Beowulf*

The first scholars to venture the analysis of *Beowulf* mainly looked at the poem as if it were an early part of the *Chronicle*. From that point of view the monsters must have seemed no more than irritating mistakes which reduces the value of an important historical document. The monsters remained guilty until J. R. R. Tolkien redeemed them by claiming in his famous essay, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" that if anybody is to be blamed it is rather the wrong approach than the monsters themselves. He proved that if *Beowulf* is tackled as a work of literature by analyzing the text as text, the monsters perfectly fit into the whole concept. Following in his footsteps I am now venturing to prove that the monsters are not only an important part of the poem but they are the essence of the whole and without their presence the structural and thematic unity of the poem would seem incomplete.

First of all, it is advisable to examine the proportion of historical and non-historical elements throughout the poem. As it is mentioned above, the text was originally seen rather as an historical document than a work of art. Therefore a lot of effort had been put into discovering the remnants of the world described in it. As a result of this enthusiastic research now many information is accessible about the places in which *Beowulf* was set and about some characters as well. The characters which seem to be obviously non-historical are Beowulf and the monsters.

This simple fact made many critics claim, that the monsters are nothing but a sad mistake, a burden on the poem and it would be beneficial to its reception if it stood entirely on the firm ground of history.¹ I am convinced that it is exactly the other way round. The small number of non-historical (or we might as well say mythical) characters already implies that they are going to have a significant role on the whole.

On the other hand, I venture to claim that those who criticized the monsters' presence in *Beowulf* ignore the fact that it was not written by a historicist, but a poet (or even poets). Sharing long past historical events with the audience was probably not his main concern. Instead, he had an editorial purpose: setting an example to everybody of that time's moral and heroic values. To achieve this task he was forced to introduce a protagonist who was blessed with a tremendous amount of these values. Therefore, in order to equal this extraordinary level of positive powers the monsters are not a 'sad mistake' but a basic necessity.

¹Tolkien, J. R. R. *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*. In Donoghue, Daniel ed. Heaney, Seamus trans. *Beowulf a Verse Translation*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 2002, p. 104-106.

According to Earl the heroic world is a dimension which is in-between the mythical and the historical world.² Adopting his concept the mythical world must be inhabited by non-historical creatures raging from beasts to gods opposed to the historical world which is no more than sheer reality. The heroic world is placed somewhere between the two, therefore it is in special need of some non-historical beings to achieve this mixed feature.

After this brief justification of the monsters' appearance I turn now to the analysis of these supernatural creatures. Due to limitations of length I am obliged to tackle only the 'main' monsters (Grendel, his mother and the dragon) but I would like to point out that there are some other beasts (mainly the underwater ones) which would also deserve analysis.

First of all, I would like to highlight the different role the Beowulfian monsters have as opposed to their South European colleagues. According to J. R. R. Tolkien this difference can easily be spotted by observing the monsters relationship with the gods.³ The Cyclops of Greek mythology (a creature which is somewhat similar to Grendel) is no less fearless or monstrous than the northern monsters but unlike these it is god-begotten whereas in northern mythology monsters are represented as the foes of the gods.⁴

But Tolkien goes even further claiming that although the Beowulfian monsters are of northern origin they had already been subject to a certain transformation in the direction of Christianity and "became inevitably the enemies of the one God".⁵ Besides this he also gives emphasis to the fact that this transformation is not complete yet. The monsters in Beowulf are not mere personifications of particular sins but they still have a physical form: "Grendel inhabits the visible world and eats the flesh and blood of men; he enters their houses by the doors. The dragon wields a physical fire, and covets gold not souls; he is slain with iron in his belly."⁶

I am convinced that this idea manages to capture the main essence of the Beowulfian monsters. Should they be mere metaphors they would really seem a sad mistake in this gloomy and cruel world of battles and boasts. Moreover, a Grendel who was a mere ghost of conscience would probably fail to make Beowulf a hero in the land of the Danes and Geats. What is expected here is a combat of physical strength, sweat and blood. And with that we now arrived at the first monster, Grendel.

² Earl, W. James. *Thinking About 'Beowulf'*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 1994, p. 46.

³ Tolkien, pp. 116-119.

⁴ Ibid. pp. 118-119.

⁵ Ibid. p. 119

⁶ Ibid.

From what the poem tells us about his origin it can be easily concluded that Grendel is one of these new-type, half-Christian, and half-pagan monsters. By claiming that he is a descendant of Cain the poet places him into Biblical history and at the same time identifies him as the foe of the one God. His pagan features can also be traced back. For instance the poem mentions that God had punished the monsters and that their exile was bitter I am sure that it can be assumed that this bitterness bears much resemblance to that of the exiles of the later Anglo-Saxon elegies ('The Seafarer', 'The Wanderer').

The sorrowful exile of this monster opposed to the feasting warriors creates a contrast between the beautifully lit hall and the outside darkness. This opposition would definitely lose its power if the monster was omitted and an exclusive focus was on the 'natural' darkness of night. Grendel is not only paralleled with night (he "approaches Heorot in much the same manner as the night itself had come upon the feasting warriors"⁷) but he himself somehow gives depth to this darkness. Nevertheless, some attention must be paid to the fact that this deep night over Heorot is no longer a purely pagan darkness but a half-Christianized one as Grendel himself.

He is claimed to be one of

...those monsters born
Of Cain, murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel's death...⁸

By this Grendel gains a place within biblical history and upon all these it seems a defensible argument that the darkness he dwells in is the darkness of Cain's crime. Yet, in the flow of the poem what the reader perceives is real night, real slime and the real tearing of living warriors by a monster that is presented not only as a physical being but as one who has intentions and thoughts of his own.

Then what could be the poet's intention to insert this Old Testament story? Cain is the key for Grendel in obtaining a thematic role on the whole. No matter how many Christian elements appear in it the poem still stands on the firm base of Anglo-Saxon moral attitudes. According to this the greatest sins that a man can commit are betraying his lord and becoming a kin slayer. By claiming that Grendel is the descendant of the first kin slayer of mankind the giant becomes an opponent for Beowulf not only physically but morally as well.

⁷ Orchard, Andy. *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*. D. S. Brewer: Cambridge, 2003, p. 191.

⁸ Throughout this essay I am going to use Kevin Crossley-Holland's verse translation of *Beowulf*. In. Halácsy, Katalin ed. *An Anthology of Medieval English Literature*. Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar: Piliscsaba, 2005, p. 29. ll. 105-108.

Moreover, as it is mentioned above Grendel is not a mere beast but one who is armed with reason. Consequently, when the Grendel plot begins it is nothing else but the monster's own thoughts and intentions which make the poem go forward. For instance, the first raid on Heorot was a consequence of Grendel being enraged by the music in the hall:

A powerful monster, living down
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
As day after day the music rang⁹

But Grendel's main role as a monster with reason only unfolds in his battle against Beowulf. Their combat (which is literally a hand-to-hand battle) is described as if it was fought by two warriors much unlike those carried out by fairy tale knights gaining victory over a dope of a monster. Considering all these it can be concluded that what happens between Beowulf and Grendel is as much a mental fight as it is a physical one. Until this very moment Grendel had no opponents to match his superhuman strength. Moreover, Beowulf is probably the first living creature in Heorot who is capable of causing him pain. Taking this into consideration their fight can be seen as a process in which Grendel's pain first transforms into fear which gradually takes him over. The turning point of this mental combat could be the very moment in which Grendel realizes that Beowulf is going to defeat him and so "the predator becomes prey"¹⁰:

That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
Knew at once that nowhere on earth
Had he met a man whose hands were harder;
His mind was flooded with fear – but nothing
Could take his talons and himself from that tight
Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:
This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.¹¹

Andy Orchard points out that in this situation even Grendel is capable of evoking sympathy.¹² We might even suppose that creating a slight sympathy towards Cain's race at such an early point in the poem can be seen as a prelude to the following. For it is quite sure that a mother who is robbed of his child evokes sympathy even if she is of the God-cursed species.

⁹ Ibid. ll. 86-88.

¹⁰ Orchard, p. 192.

¹¹ *Beowulf*, p. 41., ll. 750-757.

¹² Orchard, p. 192.

And following this course of thinking we can find ourselves now in a marsh with even more treacherous slime than that of Grendel's lair. That is the problem of the female monster's role. Early critics seem to have disposed of the problem by simply omitting it. For instance J. R. R. Tolkien himself claims: "I shall confine myself mainly to the monsters – Grendel and the Dragon..."¹³

The reason for this was probably the fact that many critics tried to analyse the poem on a structural basis. That is that they tackled the whole as a bipolar one. The first pole is Beowulf's youth in which his main combatant is obviously Grendel, whilst the second one is his old age in which his last combatant and doom is evidently the dragon. In this view there is not much room for the structure-breaking she-monster, especially due to the fact that her appearance is considerably shorter than the other fiends' (roughly 500 lines compared to Grendel's roughly 1100-1200 lines or the dragon's 1000 lines¹⁴).

According to all these it must be admitted that looking at her role from a purely structural point of view she does not really fit in. Therefore, as in the case of Grendel we already did, we turn to analysing her role in the thematic unity of the whole.

The main feature that differentiates Grendel's mother from the other two monsters is her gender. Even though there is an Icelandic saga dealing with a giant-like creature which is described as a female one (*Grettir the Strong and the Trollwoman*¹⁵) we can conclude that she-monsters were probably not common in northern mythology. Consequently, this unusual choice of gender must have a special role in *Beowulf*, and it can be that this is the very thread with which this plot is woven into the whole.

To prove this suggestion I involve a short analysis of female roles in Anglo-Saxon society. In this attempt I am going to turn to the assistance of Jane Chance's revealing essay, "The Structural Unity of Beowulf"¹⁶, dealing with this problem.

If an ideal woman of this world could be characterized by two words these would probably be "peace-weaver" and "cup-passer". A wife of this era was nothing more than a tool to handle problematic issues with surrounding kingdoms. They and their children became the living seals of peace between two nations. And once they were queens of a hall they also earned the second role, that of the cup-passer, who kept the company together and had the right to give some advice even to the king himself.

¹³ Tolkien, p. 103.

¹⁴ Chance, Jane. *The Structural Unity of Beowulf*. In: Donoghue, Daniel ed. Heaney, Seamus trans. *Beowulf a Verse Translation*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 2002, p. 153.

¹⁵ Donoghue, Daniel ed. Heaney, Seamus trans. *Beowulf a Verse Translation*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 2002, pp. 86-89.

¹⁶ Chance, pp. 152-167.

Interestingly, the Beowulf poet is far away from praising this situation. Whenever the issue appears it is not elevated but tackled either in an ironic or in a tragic, lamenting manner. For the previous the example could be Thryth who does not come up to the expectations of his contemporaries and therefore becomes unnatural. For the latter the Finnsburg Episode can be mentioned in which the Hildeburh ends up as a sad victim of these unwritten social rules. From this it seems clear that all female characters are there in order to criticize these generally accepted female roles.

Accordingly, the she-monster herself trots the ground as living criticism of peace-weavers and cup-passers. The sympathy which her just desire for vengeance evoked may subside if we approach the matter from the point of view that she is female. Although taking revenge for your dead kinsman is one of the basic rules of this society, this was always a men's issue with which women never had the right to interfere.

In order to prove this statement it is advisable to observe Beowulf's battle against Grendel's mother. The first thing that catches the readers' attention is that this fight is somehow more violent and horrible than the first combat. It seems understandable if one looks at the poem as a sequence of events in which the protagonist faces ever greater challenges. However the matter becomes quite confusing if we take into consideration that the second combatant is a female and the natural weakness of her gender should offer Beowulf an easier fight. But it is the other way round.

Whilst Beowulf quite quickly manages to turn Grendel's fury into fear he almost perishes against the she-monster. I am convinced that this is due to the fact that Grendel's mother fights more male-like than her son. She succeeds in coming over Beowulf and she wields a weapon too. Moreover, Beowulf's hands fail him this time and he has to use the ancient sword he finds to kill her. Therefore one may come up with the question whether despite her gender the she-monster was even stronger than her son. Obviously, she was not physically stronger than Grendel but the perversion in her acting out a man's role is the thing that really makes her monstrous and even shocking in the eyes of the contemporary audience.

As a result it can be claimed that although the she-monster plot fails to fit in the structure (as far as its length is concerned) it unarguably has its place in the thematic unity of the poem. Besides this Jane Chance also emphasises that Grendel's mother has a transitional role by linking the Grendel part to that of the dragon. She claims: "as a «retainer» attacking Heorot she resembles Grendel, but as an «attacked ruler» of her own «hall» she resembles the

dragon.”¹⁷ And although some questions still remained I think that now the thread of the she-monster has found its place in the consciously woven web of the poem.

And now I am going to turn to the protagonist’s last combatant and doom, the dragon. First of all, I would like to highlight the fact that the role of this creature is, if not radically but at least significantly, different from that of the two man-eating giants. Although the latter ones are essentially needed to create balance (it would probably sound ridiculous to make Beowulf a hero in a fight against a fierce Danish warrior and kill him by a dragon) but the dragon has a special role. He signifies the end of things, both Beowulf’s personal death and the death of the heroic world itself.

In order to look further into this matter I am trying to produce a short analysis of the difference between the Christian and northern concepts of apocalypse. “An apocalypse, according to its Greek derivation, is an uncovering, a revelation, a revealing of something hidden.”¹⁸ This sentence summarizes the basic features of the Christian concept of apocalypse. Although the second coming of the Redeemer will mean the destruction of the world we know but it also includes a new beginning, a reconciliation between the natural and the supernatural. The northern concept is different. “Ragnarök takes place in the mythical world and does not dissolve the distinction between the ideal mythical and real historical worlds, between desire and reality.”¹⁹ The common joke among Anglo-Saxonists that there is no future in Old English (referring to the lack of future tense in this language) comes to life here. The last battle means the ultimate destruction of everything including the world of gods as well and there is no focus on revelation. If anything is revealed, argues Earl, it is the nature of history, the world, and human life.²⁰

I am convinced that this statement catches the essence of the whole poem. It is centred on the fact that history, the world and human life itself are transitory. *Lif is læne* – that is the basis of *Beowulf* and to prove this statement it would be hard to find a better creature than the dragon. It is a pure child of the northern way of thinking not yet stained by Christianity. Unlike the giants when the dragon appears there is no mentioning of Cain not even any hints on its origin:

¹⁷ Chance, p. 167.

¹⁸ Earl, p. 41.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 44.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 46.

... a dragon awoke from its darkness
And dreams and brought terror to his people...²¹

But on the other hand he is somewhat similar to Grendel because he dwells in the darkness and only stirs when humans disturb him. Despite this the dragon is quite unique as far as its species is concerned having only one rival in northern mythology, Fáfnir (this creature is also mentioned in *Beowulf* when the protagonist is compared to the dragon-slayer, Sigemund).

But the most important feature of the dragon is that his very existence is connected to human life. He guards a heap of treasures which belonged to people long passed in a hall which was built by the hands of mankind. In this approach the dragon signifies no less than the sorrows of human life especially over the fact that everything in this world is transitory and once the people pass away only the earthly treasures remain with a gloomy memory of the past lurking in the darkness.

Considering all these J. R.R. Tolkien's claim that the whole poem can be called an elegy²² sounds defensible. However, I am convinced it would not be so but for the dragon's contribution. A battle against warriors from Sweden would probably be sufficient to show the individual tragedy of a particular man but to reveal the ultimate tragedy of mankind (which the poem achieves) requires a dragon.

Taking all these views into consideration one might come to the conclusion that due to the monsters and especially to the dragon the world of the poem is bitter and utterly hopeless. The world rushes towards its end and the wages of heroism is death. But it is not as easy as it seems. Though, Beowulf and his whole nation are dead their deeds are conserved within this poem. Therefore it can be assumed that despite the transitory feature of human life there is something that can survive and that is heroism. The destruction of the heroic world can also be seen as something inevitable as it resulted in the beginning of the historical world. To change between the ages of the world a climax is unavoidable and a fire-breathing dragon is a marvellous choice for this role.

In conclusion, then it can be stated that the monsters are not only a significant part of the plot and the thematic structure but they are also responsible for creating the special atmosphere of the whole. Showing features both of Christianity and heathenism they refer back to the past and point towards the future at the same time. Besides connecting the different eras of the world they also signify something that is eternal. They symbolize the

²¹ Beowulf, p. 67, ll. 2210-2211.

²² Tolkien, p. 127.

transitory feature of human life, the sorrow at the inevitability of death which will be felt until one single man will trot the earth.

Nonetheless, there are still many open questions. As we have the poem in isolation we cannot judge the monsters' role in it in comparison to its contemporaries. Similarly, we can hardly imagine what a man-eating giant and a dragon meant to an audience who had the experience of 'real' darkness many centuries before the light of electricity governed the world. But despite all these we cannot give up dealing with this magnificent work of art because it is sure that we will be able to come up with some more answers before the dragon comes.

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