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## Beowulf: Description of the Violent Conflict and Literary Techniques of this Segment of the Poem

Within the Old English epic poem entitled 'Beowulf,' one theme dominates: to overcome chaos and establish order, a fearless individual must continually fight the force of evil. Even after the poem's protagonist, Beowulf, victoriously destroys Grendel, the personification of chaos and evil, Beowulf's battles are not over. Grendel's mother remains alive and an immediate threat. It is she who was the source of Grendel's life, she who bore him in her womb, and it is thus she who is the source of the evil against which Beowulf found it his duty to fight. The ensuing battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother is the second of the poem's three battles, and the author's description of the violent conflict is a central and important passage of the work. Within the passage the author utilizes literary techniques that aid in the presentation of this important segment of the poem. These techniques include alliteration, personification, and powerful diction. The techniques can be traced throughout the entire passage.

Prior to this passage, which occurs approximately in the middle of the poem's plot, Beowulf traveled to a distant Danish shore from his native Geatland, with the intent of ridding the foreign soil of the infamously brutal monster, Grendel. This monster, a shadow of death [hunting] in the darkness terrorized the Danes for twelve years and repeatedly murdered the citizens; agony hung / On king and people alike, harsh / And unending, violent and cruel, and evil. However, Grendel discovered in Beowulf an undefeatable enemy, and the monster found his death at the protagonist's hands. Soon it became clear that a greater challenge for Beowulf remains; Grendel's mother is eager to avenge the death of her child. Beowulf has descended to the witch's underwater palace, and the ensuing battle constitutes this significant passage in the poem.

One of the key literary techniques utilized within this passage, alliteration (including its derivative, sibilance) is present in the opening two lines. Beowulf saw / the mighty water witch and swung his sword. Sibilance (saw, swung, sword) sandwiches the alliterated description of Beowulf's enemy (water witch). This syntax would most likely engage listeners and enhance the contrast between the monster and the movements of the hero. The sibilance also contributes an aural element to the visual image of the sword's kinesthetic movement. The sword sang its fierce song / sang Beowulf's strength. The verb to sing personifies the weapon, a technique that is effective in part because of the repetition of the verb. The continued sibilance, used in association with the sword, makes the personification of, and imagery associated with the sword consistent. The swooping sound of the sword is suggested because of the sibilance, and the force of the weapon's motion is equally effectively depicted because nearly every word in the

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description's five lines is monosyllabic. The diction thus parallels the poem's action.

Beowulf is referred to as the 'guest' of Grendel's mother. This reference has interesting implications. It suggests that in order to battle the source of evil, Beowulf must pervade that evil's domain. To establish order, suggests the author, one must invade the realm of naturally occurring chaos. The hero of the poem's era would take that risk. Indeed, Beowulf and the monster wrestled. The verb denotes two competitors physically intertwining in a battle for dominance. Just as Beowulf must descend into the domain of evil to battle it, so too must he physically engage himself with evil to overcome it. Order and chaos, like two wrestlers, are in a constant battle for supremacy, but as chaos is the natural state of existence, order becomes the guest who must fight to overcome the status quo. Beowulf soon discovers that his helmet for the first time in years of being worn to war would earn no glory. The author's inclusion of the word 'years' establishes the fact that Beowulf's battles have almost a timeless quality. Metaphorically, the struggle to establish order where chaos exists has always existed and probably always will. The battle is a natural struggle of the human condition.

Even as the author alludes to the omnipresence of this eternal struggle to replace chaos with order, Beowulf's determination to succeed becomes the focus of the poem: 'But / Beowulf / Longed only for fame'? The alliterated b consonant accentuates the volta, shifting the focus of the poem to Beowulf's determination. Beowulf 'longed only for fame, leaped back / into battle'? The two verbs, longed and leaped, are alliterated. The forceful diction engages readers in the action of the battle. Still, sibilance maintains the poem's auditory flow as Beowulf 'tossed his sword aside.'

In contrast to the sibilance that dominates the first portion of this passage, a thematically important sentence, if weapons were useless he'd use / his hands, the strength in his fingers' contains dominating internal sibilance. Because the sound in strength is now unique because it is the only word in the sentence that actually begins with an's, the effect is that it stands out. This draws attention to the thematically important fact that Beowulf finds strength within himself. The contrast is effective.

Following is a pithy maxim: 'So fame / Comes to the men who mean to win it / And care about nothing else? This sentence stands out not only because of its thematic and didactic content, but also because of its exclamatory punctuation and dominating monosyllabic diction. Thus, in two adjoining sentences the hero of the mid first millennium is outlined: a determined and fully devoted man who finds strength within his own being to fight the forces of evil and replace chaos with order. Appropriately, then, the diction depicting Beowulf's battle against Grendel's mother is forceful, which contributes to the depiction of Beowulf as strong and powerful, even without his weaponry. [Beowulf's seized her by the shoulder; anger / doubled his strength. The sibilance that previously was attributed to the motion of the sword now depicts the actions of

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Beowulf. Beowulf alone contains the strength he once sought from the sword.

The action continues. The water witch falls, Grendel's fierce mother, and the Geats / Proud Prince was ready to leap on her. Both characters are identified by more than just a pronoun or a name. The audience is thus consistently reminded, in colorful terms, of the protagonist's heroic status and the antagonist's evil nature. The character traits blend with the names. Furthermore, Beowulf is given power by the plosive alliteration of proud prince.

As the end of the battle is described, the actions of Grendel's mother are depicted with words and phrases that connote chaos, such as clutching and wildly tearing. The atmosphere of chaos sharply contrasts with the portrayal of the symbol of order, Beowulf, who is here described as that best / And strongest of soldiers. The use of the superlative almost hyperbolizes the hero.

Double alliteration draws the audience's attention to the witch's dagger, brown with dried blood. This witch has been victorious in many past battles, and it appears as if she will once again be succeed. Beowulf was stretched / On his back. This is the position of bestial helplessness, and thus the struggle against chaos is extended to all creation. Once again the omnipresent nature of the battle between order and chaos, good and evil, is emphasized.

Beowulf's own strength momentarily fails him, but he is saved by the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest. The mail shirt is a microcosm for human protective devices devised by humanity to save itself from the destructive forces of chaos. Once again Beowulf seeks strength outside of his own being. After a long caesura (between 'helped' and 'and') the tone of the poem shifts to one of Christianity. Thus, the caesura juxtaposes the poem's pagan elements to its Christian elements, although structurally the Christian inclusion appears merely an afterthought. However, God sends Beowulf victory only once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting. It is the protective devices that save humanity from being completely destroyed by chaos, but victory over that chaos is possible only when one's own strength is utilized. The protection of God is merely another mail shirt.

Finally, the battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother is thematically important to the overall poem, and it is thus appropriately placed in the center of the plot. Within the passage listeners attentions are directed to the most important phrases and lines because of alliteration (especially sibilance), personification, and powerful diction. The consistent use of these literary techniques contributes to their effectiveness. The consistency would have been especially important for an audience relying solely of the oral presentation of the work.

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