
The Poem *Beowulf* and the Introduction of Christianity amongst the Anglo-Saxons

The poem *Beowulf* marks a period of change in the history of England, namely, the introduction of Christianity amongst the Anglo-Saxons, which led to a newfound interest in literacy. In the seventh century, Irish monks from the north were active in propagating Christianity, aided by the mission of Augustine, which during the same time extended its headquarters in the south to the Anglian kingdoms in the north. These Irish missionaries did more than just spread religion. They created famous schools, where many of their converts were educated. The Roman church as well brought a love to the land for books and learning, educating people in the languages of Latin and Greek (Lawrence 7).

Although many of the concepts in *Beowulf* reflect attitudes of pagan Anglo-Saxon times, still contains many newly introduced Christian themes; themes that occasionally clash with older values (Irving 21). Before Christianity reached its peak in the medieval period, traits such as heroism and arrogance were to be admired, just as long as they did not strive too close to the gods and the heavens. Early Christian writers such as St. Augustine were key in turning people away from pagan attitudes, including earthly arrogance and desire for wealth. Although some aspects of pagan attitudes still lurk within *Beowulf*, its Christian values are clear. Most scholars believe that *Beowulf* was written by a Christian author, who was most likely a monk, which explains the poem's attempts to instill Christian morality in the reader. Everything happens in *Beowulf* can be credited to the grace of God, whether it is victory in battle, or the taking of booty after a victory. For example, after *Beowulf* and his men finished their journey to Denmark they, "thanked God for that easy crossing on a calm sea" (227-28); and before his battle with Grendel, he says, "Whichever one death fells must deem it a just judgement by God" (440-41). After Grendel's defeat *Beowulf* claims that he, ". . . was granted the glory of winning" (817-18). In addition to *Beowulf*'s recognition of God in everything he does, he also seems to have a mystical protection that guards all of his actions. At the same time, *Beowulf* realizes that this protection must be earned, specifically through his values: courage, honesty, pride, and humility. An example of how God protects *Beowulf* occurs when he opens a treasure upon which the ancients had placed a spell. *Beowulf* is somehow able to open the treasure with no effect at all, since he is protected by God (Irving 87).

Perhaps more interesting than the history of Christianity and its effect on *Beowulf* are the numerous biblical symbols and references in the text. One of the first and most obvious biblical references is the story of Cain and Abel. Grendel, who in the ancient version of this story probably took on more of a demonic role, is transformed by the Christian author into a

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

descendent of Cain. The monster is described as a fiend from hell, "malignant by nature," and "never showing remorse" (137). Nature in this sense takes on a new meaning. It doesn't simply refer to the world around us, but it refers to the godly nature that is believed to govern the world. Grendel, "bears both the mark of Cain and the wrath of God." He is often times referred to as a refugee banished into the wilderness for the murder of his brother, as Anglo-Saxon outlaws of that time were (Irving 47-48). The descriptions of Grendel clearly cause the reader to identify him with darkness and evil, and thus as an opponent of God. There is also a subtle reference to the resurrection of Jesus and God, the Father in the description when: "Hrothgar, watching the lake water, saw a heave-up and surge of waves and blood in the backwash. They bowed gray heads, spoke in their sage, experienced way about the good warrior, how they never again expected to see that prince returning in triumph to their king" (1592-58). The blood that Hrothgar sees rising to the top is similar to that of Jesus', and when Beowulf is found to be alive, it is symbolic of the Christian resurrection.

The author of *Beowulf* gives high esteem to the mother of Beowulf, saying that God must have "bestowed a grace on her" and that she brought forth a "flower of manhood," a further parallel between Jesus and Beowulf. There are also references to the great flood that took place in the Book of Genesis. Take for example this passage describing Beowulf's sword:

It was engraved all over and showed how war first came into the world and the flood destroyed the tribe of giants. They suffered a terrible severance from the Lord; the Almighty made the waters rise, drowned them in the deluge for retribution (1687-93).

The author of *Beowulf* is suggesting that the sword's creators were the descendants of those that caused God to bring on the flood, and perhaps even suggesting that they were descendants of Cain. Ironically enough, earlier in the passage the giants were referred to in a positive manner. This leads us to some of the Christian contradictions that appear in *Beowulf*.

In the author's attempt to Christianize *Beowulf*, there are undoubtedly some remains of the pagan ideology from which the poem emerged. When offerings are made to idols, it is requested that one of the old pagan gods save them from the terror of Grendel, and the carved images of boars on the warriors' helmets act as good luck charms, a seemingly unchristian, idolatrous practice. There are also traces of the poem's pagan ancestry in its description of Grendel's descendants who, although they are simply supposed to be descended from Cain, are described as, ". . . fatherless creatures . . . their whole ancestry is hidden in a past of ghosts and demons" (1355-57).

Yet another example of how paganism and Christianity intermix in the poem occurs during Beowulf's death. The author makes no mention of Beowulf's cremation, an act that Christianity would surely condemn. While looking onto the afterlife his Christian God will provide,

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

Beowulf thinks about the killing of his kinsmen, a Germanic sin that he begins to believe could prevent him from entering heaven (Irving 113). Then, instead of speaking more about the sweet afterlife Beowulf will have, the poet focuses on Beowulf and the dragon lying side by side, painting a rather paganistic picture of Beowulf's death (Irving 88).

The author chooses to mix Christian symbols and practices with their pagan counterparts, rather than stick with either one. The religion of the characters isn't one of steadfastness, but seems to be one imposed on them by force. According to *Beowulf* critic William Lawrence, "the poorest and weakest parts of the poem are to be found among the definitely Christian passages. The only thing naïve about the poem is its theology. Here is untried material, and a childlike attitude toward a new faith" (Lawrence 9).

Beowulf is in fact an Anglo-Saxon pagan poem transformed into a pseudo-Christian poem by a Christian author. Indeed there are many Christian elements to this poem, but when contrasted with the reality of the pagan times in which *Beowulf* is set, it becomes unrealistic to believe they could coexist, and it seems that the author may have been forced to include certain traditions and practices that might not have existed in an original version of the poem. Perhaps significantly, the usage of the word "God" decreases as the poem progresses, a sign that the poet, or editor, of *Beowulf* might not be as Christian as we think.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)