

## The Rise and Fall of Beowulf

By Matias Ahrens Dorf

The ancient and mythical poem, *Beowulf*, tells the dramatic story of the life and death of Beowulf. J.R.R Tolkien, in his essay “*Beowulf: The Monster and his Critics*,” states that the epic tale is about the two great moments in one’s life: the ascent of the youthful hero to glory and his inevitable decline to vulnerable old age and death. The Anglo Saxons loved to go to mead halls, drink, and tell stories of great heroes and usually these narratives consisted of the rise and eventual downfall of the hero. For example, at the beginning of the epic poem, a scop tells the tale of Shild, a great Danish King, describing his rise to greatness through an account of how “he’d traveled to Denmark alone/ An abandoned child, but changed his own fate/Lived to be rich and much honored” (6-8). Every great man has his downfall, however, and “When his time was come the old king died” (25). Beowulf becomes a famous hero when he rids Denmark of the monster Grendel as well as his horrible mother and then eventually comes to his demise when he confronts a dragon terrorizing all of Geatland.

What makes the drama of Beowulf’s life gripping and deeply moving is the complex interplay of youthful fearlessness and seasoned caution within his character. Beowulf first emerges as a great warrior by traveling to Denmark, the realm of King Hrothgar, and boldly fighting Grendel, the monster haunting Herot Hall every night. When Beowulf first appears he is very proud and even arrogant, exclaiming before his fight with Grendel, ““This fiend is a bold/ And famous fighter, but his claws and teeth scratching at my shield, his clumsy fists beating at my sword blade, would be helpless”” (679-682). Fearlessly declaring, ““I will meet him/ With my hands empty”” (682-683), the young hero boasts that, since it would be too easy to defeat Grendel with armor and a sword, he will fight him barehanded. His victorious battle with

Grendel, however, tempers his pride, for when he subsequently fights Grendel's mother he prudently chooses to wear armor, "Not afraid for his life but knowing the woven/ Mail, with its hammered links, could save/ That life" (1443-1445). These feats catapult Beowulf to the summit of heroic glory, but the sobering experience of battling these monsters also humbles the youthful hero by teaching him his vulnerability and mortality.

After Beowulf returns to Geatland, he proudly recounts his splendid exploits in Denmark to his king Higlac. However, the increasingly mature hero subordinates his pride and love of glory out of loyalty to his king. When the Frisians slay Higlac, his widow brings Beowulf the crown and "offered him the kingdom," but he nobly refuses and insists on placing Herdred, Higlac's son, on the throne (2370). It is only after Herdred is killed by the Swedes that "Beowulf ruled in Geatland" (2206). So devoted is Beowulf to the memory of Higlac's son that, as soon as he becomes king he seeks revenge for Hildred's death by fighting and vanquishing the Swedes. During this period of his life, as the youthful warrior grows into the noble king, Beowulf deepens his heroism by demonstrating the virtues of loyalty and magnanimity as well as courage.

The last great heroic episode of Beowulf's life reveals the ripened wisdom of the old king but also the enduring pride of the young warrior. When Beowulf "was old/ With years and wisdom, fifty winters/ A king," he finally meets the instrument of his destruction in the form of a dragon (2208-2210). When the dragon is awakened by a thief it goes on a rampage throughout Geatland and, "Vomiting fire and smoke, the dragon/ Burned down their homes" (2312-2313). The emergence of the dragon foreshadows the final defeat and death of Beowulf, for "The people suffered, everyone/ Lived in terror, but when Beowulf had learned/ Of their troubles his fate was worse, and came quickly" (2309-2311). Even when facing the deadly monster, however, the now aged king shows that he retains the youthful spirit of the proud, glory-loving warrior he once

was, for “he saw nothing to fear, thought nothing/ Of the beast’s claws, or wings, or flaming/ Jaws” and consequently insists on facing the dragon alone (2347-2349). The king nevertheless also shows the wisdom life has taught him, for just before he fights, he “felt something, not fear but knowledge/ Of old age” (2421-2422). Beowulf is right to recognize his own weakness because the dragon does succeed in poisoning him with his bite and he only vanquishes the dragon before he dies thanks to the assistance of the courageous young warrior Wyglaf. Beowulf’s demise marks the end of his tale and he dies with all the glory a man could want. His death however also marks the beginning of Wyglaf’s rise, since the young hero now becomes the new king of Geatland.

A study of Beowulf demonstrates the truth of J.R.R Tolkien’s statement that “[Beowulf] is essentially a balance, an opposition between ends and beginnings.” Beowulf begins as a fearless, headstrong warrior, certain that he can vanquish any foe, and he ends as a wise king, conscious of his fragility and mortality, and mindful of his need for the strength of a young warrior. In this respect, there is a clear opposition between the two seasons of Beowulf’s life, his youth and his age, his rising and his setting. But the poem also shows that the young Beowulf lives on in the old Beowulf, for the old king proudly faces the ferocious dragon with the stubborn determination of a youthful warrior. Beowulf changes in the course of the poem, as all human beings change in the course of their lives. Nevertheless, what makes Beowulf so memorable a hero is his capacity to combine the sobriety and prudence that he has learned over the course of his life with the fiery passion and bravery of his youthful self.

#### Works Cited

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Tolkien, J.R.R.. "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." *Readings on Beowulf*. Ed., Stephen P. Thompson. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1998. 24-30. Print.

I pledge my honor that I have neither given nor received aid on this paper.

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