

= Beowulf : The Monsters and the Critics =

" Beowulf : The Monsters and the Critics " was a 1936 lecture given by J. R. R. Tolkien on literary criticism on the Old English heroic epic poem Beowulf . It was first published as a paper in that year in the Proceedings of the British Academy , and has since been reprinted in many collections .

Tolkien argues that the original poem has almost been lost under the weight of the scholarship on it ; that Beowulf must be seen as a poem , not just as a historical document ; and that the quality of its verse and its structure give it a powerful effect . He rebuts suggestions that the poem is an epic or exciting narrative , likening it instead to a strong masonry structure built of blocks that fit together . He points out that the poem 's theme is a serious one , mortality , and that the poem is in two parts : the first on Beowulf as a young man , defeating Grendel and his mother ; the second on Beowulf in old age , going to his death fighting the dragon .

The work has been praised by critics including the poet and Beowulf translator Seamus Heaney . Michael D. C. Drout called it the most important article ever written about the poem . Scholars of Anglo @-@ Saxon agree that the work was influential , transforming the study of Beowulf .

= = Overview = =

J. R. R. Tolkien 's essay " Beowulf : The Monsters and the Critics " , initially delivered as a lecture in 1936 , is regarded as a formative work in modern Beowulf studies . In it , Tolkien speaks against critics who play down the monsters in the poem , namely Grendel , Grendel 's mother , and the dragon , in favour of using Beowulf solely as a source for Anglo @-@ Saxon history . Tolkien argues that rather than being merely extraneous , these elements are key to the narrative and should be the focus of study . In doing so he drew attention to the previously neglected literary qualities of the poem and argued that it should be studied as a work of art , not just as a historical document . Later critics such as Hugh Magennis who agree with Tolkien on this point have cited him to defend their arguments .

The essay is a redacted version of a series of lectures that Tolkien delivered to Oxford undergraduates in the 1930s . Notes for these lectures exist in two manuscript versions published together in 2002 as Beowulf and the Critics , edited by Michael D. C. Drout ; these offer some insight into the development of Tolkien 's thinking on the poem , especially his much @-@ quoted metaphor of the material of the poem as a tower . " Beowulf : The Monsters and the Critics " is available in various collections including the 1983 The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays edited by Christopher Tolkien .

= = Tolkien 's argument = =

= = = Rebuttal of earlier critics = = =

Tolkien begins by noting that the original book has almost been lost under the extensive " ' literature ' " ( his inverted commas ) on the subject . He explains that Beowulf had mainly been quarried as " an historical document " , and that most of the praise and censure of the poem was due to beliefs that it was " something that it was not ? for example , primitive , pagan , Teutonic , an allegory ( political or mythical ) , or most often , an epic ; " or because the scholar would have liked it to be something else , such as " a heathen heroic lay , a history of Sweden , a manual of Germanic antiquities , or a Nordic Summa Theologica . " Tolkien gives an allegory of a man who inherits a field full of stone from an old hall . He builds a tower with some of it , but when people find the stones are older than the tower , they pull it down " to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions " .

Tolkien quotes at length what the scholar W. P. Ker thought of Beowulf , namely that " there is nothing much in the story " , and that " the great beauty , the real value , of Beowulf is in its dignity of style " . Tolkien notes that Ker 's opinion had been a powerful influence in favour of a paradoxical contrast between the poem 's supposed defect in speaking of monsters , and ( in Tolkien 's words )

its agreed " dignity , loftiness in converse , and well @-@ wrought finish " . Tolkien cites other critics , such as Raymond Wilson Chambers and Ritchie Girvan , who objected to the poem 's " wilderness of dragons " and its unworthy choice of theme . Tolkien finds it improbable that " a mind lofty and thoughtful " , as evidenced by the quality of the poetry , " would write more than three thousand lines ( wrought to a high finish ) on matter that is really not worth serious attention " . He notes that heroic human stories had been held to be superior to myth , but argues that myth has a special value : " For myth is alive at once and in all its parts , and dies before it can be dissected . " Finally Tolkien states directly " We do not deny the worth of the hero by accepting Grendel and the dragon . "

= = = Man in a hostile world = = =

In Tolkien 's view , the poem is essentially about a " man at war with the hostile world , and his inevitable overthrow in Time . " The essential tragedy is man 's brief mortal life . Grendel and the dragon are identified as enemies of a Christian God , unlike the monsters encountered by Odysseus on his travels . What had happened is that Northern courage , exultant , defiant in the face of inevitable defeat by " Chaos and Unreason " ( Tolkien cites Ker 's words ) , fuses with a Christian faith and outlook . The Beowulf poet uses both what he knew to be the old heroic tradition , darkened by distance in time , along with the newly acquired Christian tradition . The Christian , Tolkien notes , is " hemmed in a hostile world " , and the monsters are evil spirits : but as the transition was incomplete in the poem , the monsters remain real and the focus remains " an ancient theme : that man , each man and all men , and all their works shall die . "

Tolkien returns to the monsters , and regrets we know so little about pre @-@ Christian English mythology ; he resorts instead to Icelandic myth , which he argues must have had a similar attitude to monsters , men and gods . The Northern gods , like men , are doomed to die . The Southern ( Roman and Greek ) pagan gods were immortal , so to Tolkien ( a Christian ) , the Southern religion " must go forward to philosophy or relapse into anarchy " : death and the monsters are peripheral . But the Northern myths , and Beowulf , put the monsters , mortality and death in the centre . Tolkien is therefore very interested in the contact of Northern and Christian thought in the poem , where the scriptural Cain is linked to eotenas ( giants ) and ylfe ( elves ) , not through confusion but " an indication of the precise point at which an imagination , pondering old and new , was kindled . " The poem is , Tolkien states , " an historical poem about the pagan past , or an attempt at one " , obviously not with modern ideas of " literal historical fidelity " . The poet takes an old plot ( a marauding monster troubling the Scylding court ) paints a vivid picture of the old days , for instance using the Old Testament image of the shepherd patriarchs of Israel in the folces hyrde ( people 's shepherd ) of the Danes .

= = = Structure : youth versus age = = =

The general structure of the poem is then clear , writes Tolkien . " It is essentially a balance , an opposition of ends and beginnings . In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life , rising and setting ; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age , first achievement and final death . " Part A ( youth ) is lines 1 to 2199 ; part B ( age ) is lines 2200 to 3182 ( the end ) .

A secondary division of the poem occurs , Tolkien writes , at line 1887 , after which all the earlier story is summarized , so a complete account of Beowulf 's tragedy is given between 1888 and the end , but without the account of the gloomy court of Heorot , or of the contrast between the young Beowulf and the old Hrothgar .

The poem 's metre , too , is founded on a balance of two halves to each line , " more like masonry than music " . Tolkien argues that the poem is not meant to be an exciting narrative , nor a romantic story , but a word @-@ picture , " a method and structure that ... approaches rather to sculpture or painting . It is a composition not a tune . " Far from being weakly structured , it " is curiously strong " . It

is not an ' epic ' , nor even a magnified ' lay ' . No terms borrowed from Greek or other literatures

exactly fit : there is no reason why they should . Though if we must have a term , we should choose rather ' elegy ' . It is an heroic @-@ elegiac poem ; and in a sense all its first 3 @,@ 136 lines are the prelude to a dirge .

= = = A singular effect = = =

Tolkien takes a moment to dismiss another criticism , that monsters should not have been made to appear in both halves . He replies he can see the point of no monsters , but not in complaining about their mere numbers ; the poet could not , he argues , have balanced Beowulf 's rise to fame through a war in Frisia , against death by dragon . Similarly , he dismisses notions that the poem is primitive : it is instead a late poem , using materials left over from a vanished age :

When new Beowulf was already antiquarian , in a good sense , and it now produces a singular effect . For it is now to us itself ancient ; and yet its maker was telling of things already old and weighted with regret , and he expended his art in making keen that touch upon the heart which sorrows have that are both poignant and remote . If the funeral of Beowulf moved once like the echo of an ancient dirge , far @-@ off and hopeless , it is to us as a memory brought over the hills , an echo of an echo . There is not much poetry in the world like this ;

Tolkien finishes by arguing that Beowulf " has its own individual character , and peculiar solemnity ; " and would still be powerful even if it came from some unknown time and place ; but that in fact its language , Old English ,

has still essential kinship with our own , it was made in this land , and moves in our northern world beneath our northern sky , and for those who are native to that tongue and land , it must ever call with a profound appeal ? until the dragon comes .

= = Reception = =

= = = Scholars = = =

Scholars and critics agree on the work 's wide influence . Tom Shippey wrote that the essay " was seized upon eagerly , even gratefully , by generations of critics " . Alvin A. Lee wrote that " Tolkien 's manifesto and interpretation have had more influence on readers than any other single study , even though it has been challenged on just about every one of its major points . " Seth Lerer wrote that the essay " may well be the originary piece of modern Beowulf criticism . . . . The strategies . . . control the fundamental assumptions of Old English scholarship for the next fifty years . " R.D. Fulk commented that " No one denies the historical importance of this lecture . ... opening the way to the formalist principles that played such a vital role in the subsequent development of further Beowulf scholarship . ... the methodology ... remains a model for emulation . " . Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson call it in their *Beowulf , An Edition* ( 1998 ) " the most influential literary criticism of the poem ever written " . George Clark calls it " The most influential critical essay on the poem " , stating it without qualification or justification as a known fact . Michael Lapidge similarly names it " his widely influential critical discussion of the poem " .

The scholar and translator Roy Liuzza commented that Tolkien 's essay " is usually credited with re @-@ establishing the fabulous elements and heroic combats at the center of the modern reader 's appreciation of the poem . " Liuzza at once went on to write , however , that " the separation of the poem into ' mythical ' and ' historical ' elements is a false dichotomy " . He argues that if myth can condense and hold the deepest sources of tension between self and the social order , and dramatises current ideologies by projecting them into the past , then even the hero Beowulf 's mythic fights are at the same time throwing light on society and history .

The historian Patrick Wormald wrote of the essay : " it would be no exaggeration to describe [ it ] as one of the most influential works of literary criticism of that century , and since which nothing in Beowulf studies has been quite the same . " However , Wormald continues : " The arguments of Tolkien 's paper were not universally accepted , and some of its effects would perhaps have been

disowned by the author , but its general impact could be summarized by saying that most critics have learnt to take the Beowulf poet a great deal more seriously " . Wormald added that

Tolkien argued powerfully that , for the Germanic mentality that gave birth to the myth of Ragnarök , the monsters of the poem were the only appropriate enemies for a great hero , and thus shifted Beowulf from the irrelevant fringes to the very centre of the Anglo @-@ Saxon thought world . This naturally encouraged a pre @-@ existent tendency to square the poem with what else was known of the ' serious ' levels of Anglo @-@ Saxon thought - chiefly the Latin scholarship of the Church . Secondly , Tolkien went far towards vindicating the structure of the poem by arguing that it was a balance of contrasting and interlocking halves . His thesis not only convinced many critics but inspired them to follow his example , with the result that Tolkien 's own position has been outflanked . Whereas previous generations of scholars , Tolkien included , had been quite prepared to explain what they considered structural and stylistic blemishes as interpolations , modern writers seek evidence of artistic refinement in some of the poem 's least promising features .

Michael D. C. Drout similarly describes the essay 's importance and arguments , writing that it is the most important article ever written about Beowulf ... Tolkien 's shadow looms long over Beowulf scholarship . Much of this influence is because of the enormous success of [ the essay ] , which is viewed as the beginning of modern Beowulf criticism . ... Tolkien was so influential ... because he developed a big @-@ picture reading of the poem that has found favour with several generations of critics . ... [ He ] made the first widely accepted case for viewing Beowulf as aesthetically successful , and he showed how the monsters in Beowulf were symbolic ( not allegorical ) representations of chaos and night , set in opposition to stability and civilization . ... Thus , Tolkien interpreted the theme of Beowulf to be that " man , each man and all men and all their works shall die , " a theme consistent with the heathen past but one that " no Christian need despise . " It was this theme , Tolkien argued , that brought the great dignity to the poem that even scholars who had regretted the monsters had noted .

Drout then remarks on the paradoxical success of the essay :

The massive influence of " The Homecoming " and " Beowulf : The Monsters and the Critics " is in some ways ironic . The great majority of Tolkien 's work on Beowulf was of the sort represented by the textual commentry in Finn and Hengest - detailed , philological , historical , and infinitely painstaking . Yet the most influential of Tolkien 's discussions of the poem are those in which he makes the greatest unsupported ( or lightly supported ) generalizations and in which he discusses the poem in the broadest possible terms . Tolkien would perhaps have seen a fundamental continuity between the detailed and philological and the broader and more interpret [ at ] ive work , but because of the accidents of publication ? and because of Tolkien 's great gift for rhetoric ? only the latter has shaped the field of Beowulf criticism .

John D. Niles observed that " Bypassing earlier scholarship , critics of the past fifty years have generally traced the current era of Beowulf studies back to 1936 " , meaning to Tolkien 's essay , which he called " eloquent and incisive " . Niles argued that the essay quickly came to be a starting point , as scholars from then on assumed ? with Tolkien ? that the poem was " an aesthetic unity endowed with spiritual significance . " In Niles 's view , Tolkien thought that the battles with monsters and the sombre , elegiac tone of the poem expressed the " artistic designs of a deep thinker , religiously enlightened , who let his mind play over a lost heroic world of the imagination " , in other words that the Beowulf poet was a man much like Tolkien . Niles cited George Clark 's observation that Tolkien left Beowulf scholars with the " myth of the poet as brooding intellectual , poised between a dying pagan world and a nascent Christian one . " Niles noted that Tolkien 's view of the melancholic vision of the Beowulf poet , and of the heroic fatalism of the poem 's leading characters , was not wholly new , but that his view of the poet himself as a hero was .

= = = Press = = =

Joan Acocella , writing in the The New Yorker , calls it " a paper that many people regard as not just the finest essay on the poem but one of the finest essays on English literature . " She adds that " Tolkien preferred the monsters to the critics . "

Regina Weinreich , reviewing *The Monsters and the Critics : And Other Essays* in *The New York Times* , wrote that the title essay " revolutionized the study of the early English poem *Beowulf* , in which a young hero crushes a human @-@ handed monster called Grendel . Against the scorn of critics , Tolkien defends the centrality and seriousness of literary monsters , declaring his own belief in the symbolic value of such preternatural representations of sheer evil . " Weinreich added that " *Beowulf* , like other ancient legends , served to nourish Tolkien 's imagination . "

John Garth , writing in *The Guardian* , describes the paper as " still well worth reading , not only as an introduction to the poem , but also because it decisively changed the direction and emphasis of *Beowulf* scholarship . Up to that point it had been used as a quarry of linguistic , historical and archaeological detail " . Garth notes that

Tolkien pushed the monsters to the forefront . He argued that they represent the impermanence of human life , the mortal enemy that can strike at the heart of everything we hold dear , the force against which we need to muster all our strength ? even if ultimately we may lose the fight . Without the monsters , the peculiarly northern courage of *Beowulf* and his men is meaningless . Tolkien , veteran of the Somme , knew that it was not .

= = = Translator = = =

Tolkien 's paper was praised by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney in the introduction to his critically acclaimed translation of *Beowulf* . He wrote that the " epoch @-@ making paper " stood out in considering *Beowulf* as literature . Heaney argued that Tolkien " took for granted the poem 's integrity and distinction as a work of art " , and showed how the poem achieved that status :

Tolkien assumed that the poet had felt his way through the inherited material - the fabulous elements and the traditional accounts of a heroic past - and by a combination of creative intuition and conscious structuring had arrived at a unity of effect and a balanced order . He assumed , in other words , that the *Beowulf* poet was an imaginative writer rather than some kind of back @-@ formation derived from nineteenth @-@ century folklore and philology .

Heaney called the paper 's literary treatment " brilliant " . He suggested that it had changed the way that *Beowulf* was valued , and that it had started " a new era of appreciation " of the poem .

Tolkien 's own translation of *Beowulf* , published posthumously in 2014 as *Beowulf : A Translation and Commentary* , has been linked to the essay .

= = Editions = =

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= = Translations = =

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