Epic Speak

The epic classic *Beowulf* is weak with respect to many typical epic conventions such as starting in "medias res," invocating the muse, and utilizing epic similes. In spite of this, the narrative is rich with the epic attribute of elevated language (Online Literary Handbook) in its descriptions of characters. This technique greatly augments the heroic qualities of Beowulf the character while illustrating the contemptible infamy of his foe, Grendel. The inflated prose illuminates the strong foil between the two with physical descriptions and accounts that set Beowulf and Grendel apart from others.

The embellished diction in *Beowulf* serves as a cue to the reader about the nature of the characters. Without it, the reader would certainly still interpret good characters as good and bad characters as evil; but with it, the reader sees to what extent they are this way. This is made especially clear with the characters Beowulf and Grendel. It is important that this is so since Beowulf is more than just a good character; he's a hero; and Grendel is more than just antagonistic; he's a dreadful villain.

Beowulf's character is elevated from the moment the reader *sees* him – literally. Before he proves his valor and accomplishes great feats, the author describes what a spectacular sight he is to see. The watchman at Heorot, upon first glance at Beowulf, states, "Nor have I seen/ a mightier man-at-arms on this earth/ than the one standing here: unless I am mistaken, / he is truly noble" (l. 247-50). This passage speaks a lot to the physical presence that Beowulf brings. He and his men have not yet spoken a word about who they are nor what their purpose is and, without reservation, the watchman not only identifies Beowulf as the leader of the group, but is also convinced of his strength and

ability as a warrior. Later, when he reports to Hrothgar about the men, he describes Beowulf as "formidable indeed" (l. 370). Extravagant language like this used to depict Beowulf's appearance shows that his peers revere him. It is likely the intent of the author that readers feel the same way about him. Simply put, he has "it," and everyone can *see* it.

The reader doesn't get much information about the physical appearance of Grendel, but it can be inferred that he appears mostly contrary to that of Beowulf. The poem depicts Grendel as a spectacle of size and strength. He is strong enough to take hold of 30 men at once (l. 122), and his head is large enough that it took four soldiers to carry it once removed (l. 1637-8). Still, these are just indications of his size. The author uses more emphatic language to depict his demeanor from his physicality.

In the first line about Grendel, he is introduced as a "powerful demon, a prowler through the dark" (l. 86). This line and the following lines of vague physical description suggest that the author wants readers to conjure up the image of a monster in their own minds instead of having to create one for them. Still, the author's inflated language puts evil ferocity in their heads to shape how they imagine him around mostly negative thoughts. It is likely that this demon is large, dark, and frightening, but beyond that the reader must construct his own Grendel. Later, he is called "grim" as if to solidify his already dismal disposition (l. 122). Each word employed to depict Grendel is strongly negative and connotative of evil. This is done purposefully; it makes him an adversary from the start. He starts out as evil, then initiates the conflict and remains an antagonist until death. Strong and intentional elevated language contributes greatly to this status,

even in the vagueness of his physical description. It is clear that one look upon Beowulf brings amazement while one look upon Grendel brings terror.

Another way the author heightens Beowulf's character is by singling him out as a hero. Just before his showdown with Grendel the author forecasts the imminent outcome of Beowulf's clash with the beast saying, "Through the strength of one they all prevailed; / they would crush their enemy and come through/ in triumph and gladness" (l. 698-700). Of course this is a reference to Beowulf's conquest over Grendel, but this passage is more important for its implications. It likens Beowulf to Christ in that his people gain victory over their foe (Grendel, or the devil in this sense) through him (and him only). Certainly Beowulf isn't portrayed as a deity himself; nonetheless, the parallel to Christ stands as useful since, like him, everyone is dependent on Beowulf for deliverance. Later in the poem, Beowulf is lifted up again. Before seeking his vengeance on Grendel's mother, King Hrothgar tells Beowulf that redemption is in his hands and his hands only (l. 1376-7). He is their sole hope, and the word choice of the piece makes this quite clear.

Beowulf's individuality is highlighted again a few lines later. As Grendel sneaks into the hall to wreak havoc on the men of Heorot, everyone is asleep – except Beowulf. The text states, "The hall-guards were slack, asleep at their posts, / all except one…/ One man, however, was in fighting mood, / awake and on edge, spoiling for action" (l. 704-5, 708-9). Here, Beowulf is set apart from other men and placed above them. On this occasion, his preparedness to fight is put on display.

As much as the narrator of the tale does to individualize Beowulf, he distances himself from others with his speech before taking on his final foe, the dragon. He tells the men accompanying him that the battle is not theirs to fight, and that it is only up to him to

display his might against the dragon. This is one moment where Beowulf declares his own independence. His words reflect his self-confidence and courage.

While Beowulf stands as the hope of mankind, Grendel remains the opposite. The author calls him "God-cursed" and "The bane of the race of men" (l. 712). These lines tell the reader exactly who Grendel is with respect to man and God. He is an enemy and it is his evil presence that necessitates the coming of Beowulf in the first place. It is Beowulf's single effort that dooms Grendel but, before this happens, Grendel's onslaught is defined as a "me-against-the-world" type of venture (l. 144-5). So we see how Beowulf and Grendel play off each other. Beowulf is the people's champion while the monster is the lonely public enemy number one. The diction of the author foils Beowulf as a creator and preserver with Grendel as a destroyer.

Looking at the initial description of Beowulf in the poem, he is portrayed in the following way: "There was no one else like him alive. / In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth" (l. 196-7). The author could have called him special and he could have called him mighty, but by including exactly *how* special and mighty, the reader sees Beowulf in a different light. Specifically, the author utilizes the superlative form often in his descriptions of Beowulf. Above, he is referred to as unlike any other and "mightiest." Elsewhere he is conveyed as "strongest of warriors" (l. 1544), [best]/ to raise a shield or to rule a kingdom (l. 859-60), and "unequaled in the quest for glory" (l. 2645). The superlative form heightens Beowulf's character to otherwise unattainable levels and displays him as heroic in nearly every sense of the word.

On the other hand, there is strong (nearly superlative) language showing Grendel to be just as evil as Beowulf is good. Grendel is called "The captain of evil" (l. 749).

Calling him a captain is very important to the reader's perception of Grendel as an antagonist. A captain is a leader who generally teaches others to do as he does (in this case, evil). By this, it can be inferred that Grendel is not simply a misunderstood figure gone wrong. Rather, he is a lost cause, fully corrupted and leading the charge against anything good. This point is furthered when the text says that Grendel ruled "in defiance of right" (l. 144). Here, we see that the monster has no excuse for his ways. In order to defy something, a person must know it first. So Grendel knows goodness and has consciously chosen to carry out evil in its place. He is everything humans strive to avoid and everything Beowulf is not. By utilizing specific diction, the author has achieved his aim at polarizing Beowulf and Grendel (l.164-6).

Most important of the near-superlative descriptions of Grendel are those that speak to his lack of moral convictions. He is intriniscally hateful and shameless (l. 137) and is totally numb to human suffering (119-20). It makes sense that his arch-enemy is exactly the opposite, and is called the "man most gracious and fair-minded, / kindest to his people" of all the rulers in the world (l. 3180-2). The evidence is clear; Grendel is the anti-hero. The extravagant (and almost exaggerated) style of the narrative makes it all the more lucid that Grendel is perfectly foiled with Beowulf. As inverses, they still share one common characteristic – incredible strength. We know from Unferth that no man has ever survived a tangle with Grendel (l. 525-8). Beowulf's military record is likewise. Something has to give. Fortunately, for the forces of good, it is Grendel's shoulder that does.

As is clear, Grendel is set up to be the antithesis of Beowulf. But the elevated diction of the narrative creates more than just a simple protagonist-antagonist relationship

between the two. It is said, “As long as either lived, / he was hateful to the other” (l. 813-4). They despised each other to the point that each of their purposes was to destroy the other. Without the great emphasis on unambiguously good and bad characteristics and words assigned to each character, much would have been lost to the reader from their epic relationship as foils.