

Lecture 1: *Beowulf*

(Lines 1-11: Translated by Seamus Heaney – A 34)

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in geār-dagum

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by

þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon,

and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.

hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon.

We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

Oft Scyld Scēfing sceapena þrēatum,

There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,

5 *monegum mægþum meodo-setla oftēah;*

a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.

egsode Eorle, syððan ærest wearð

This terror of the hall-troops had come far.

fēasceaft funden; hē þæs frōfre gebād:

A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on

wēox under wolcnum, weorð-myndum þāh,

as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.

oðþæt him æghwylc þāra ymb-sittendra
In the end each clan on the outlying coasts

10 *ofer hron-rāde hyran scolde,*
beyond the whale-road had to yield to him

*gomban gyl*dan: þæt wæs *gōd cyning!*
and began to pay tribute. That was one good king.

Do you notice anything odd about that conclusion?

STYLE

LANGUAGE: Old English

(Chaucer: Middle English | Milton: Early Modern English)

POETIC FORM: Alliterative Meter –

4 stressed syllables, first 3 alliterate

IRONY

→ LOCAL: esp. *litotes*: That is no good place.
(A 63: 1372)

→ DRAMATIC: e.g., Beowulf's reckless shedding of his armor is what makes it possible to defeat Grendel, who would otherwise have had him for supper. (A47 679ff. A50 800ff.)

→ STRUCTURAL: recall line 11 above:

“That was one good king”?

Then compare the description of Beowulf at end of poem:

They said that of all the kings upon earth
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

(A 100: 3180-82)

A more intense kind of irony: PARADOX

→ LOCAL: Often, for undaunted courage,
fate* spares the man it has not already marked.
(**wyrd*) (A 45: 571-72)

→ STRUCTURAL:

3 parts – youth/manhood/old age – might suggest a kind of (spiritual) growth

But: Circle - begins and ends with a funeral at sea - no growth - futility. Its's about feudalism & feuding. [1]

As a consequence, the world of the poem is very dark.

In a “state of nature” (T. Hobbes): human beings live in “continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” [2]

According to Bede: When King Edwin is urged to convert to the new Christian religion, he asks his counselors to advise him. Here is what one of them says:

“This is how the present life of man on earth . . . appears to me in comparison with that time which is unknown to us. You are sitting feasting with your ealdormen and thegns in winter time; the fire is burning on the hearth in the middle of the hall and all inside is warm, while outside the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging; and a sparrow flies swiftly through the hall. It enters in at one door and quickly flies out through the other. For the few moments it is inside, the storm and wintry tempest cannot touch it, but after the briefest moment of calm, it flits from your sight, out of the wintry storm and into it again. So this life of man appears but for a moment, what follows or what went before, we know not at all.” [3]

Coming to terms with this bleak vision of reality is crucial for understanding the dynamic of the poem. Two belief “systems,” readily distinguished by their very different responses to the fact of death, operate in tension:

A PAGAN belief system is juxtaposed with fundamentally different CHRISTIAN values: the two world views are always in tension. Can a poem do justice to both?

In the PAGAN world view: “Immortality” defined as *fame*.

It is always better
to **avenge dear ones** than to indulge in mourning.
For every one of us, living in this world
means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
that will be his best and only bulwark. (A 62: 1384-89)

Humans struggle against a hostile environment by banding together— *comitatus*:

A young prince must be prudent like [Beowulf],
giving freely while his father lives
so that afterward in age when fighting starts
steadfast companions will stand by him
and hold the line. Behavior that’s admired
is the path to power among people everywhere.

(A34: 20-25)

But the poem does not work that way. This value-system contains the seeds of its own destruction (I believe), because the need for vengeance inevitably gives rise to a self-destructive, hyper-macho ideal of valor: [4]

Hige* sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre * *purpose*
mod* sceal þe mare, þe ure maegen lytlaþ. * *courage*

Why does Beowulf have to fight the dragon?

Fame— The feudal *System*

Vengeance begets an endless cycle of fatal violence—
as in the Battle of Finnesburgh narrative (A55-59)—
whose central theme is the relentless slaughter of kindred.
Finally, Beowulf dies alone, unfriended & without heirs.

The poem also contains the basic elements of a contrary
CHRISTIAN solution to the fact of death.

What Christian themes are expressed in the poem?

One important expression of those themes is found in
Hrothgar's parting advice to Beowulf (A 71)

Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part,
eternal rewards. **Do not give way to pride.**

For a brief while your strength is in bloom
but it fades quickly; and soon there will follow
illness or the sword to lay you low. (1759-63)

In other words, forget fame, be humble, and seek “eternal
rewards” in a better world rather than glory in this one.

Does Beowulf heed this advice? Evidently.

But then, does following this advice break the cycle of violence?

NOTES

1. *Feudal* and *feud* are not the same word; they are not etymologically connected.

Feudal: Of or pertaining to a feud or fief; of the nature of a feud or fief. In feudal law, An estate in land (in England always a heritable estate), held on condition of homage and service to a superior lord, by whom it is granted and in whom the ownership remains; a fief, feudal benefice.

Feud 1. Active hatred or enmity, hostility, ill-will. [*Beowulf* 109 Ne gefeah hē þære fæþe.] **2.** A state of bitter and lasting mutual hostility. (From 16th c. often with allusion to 3.) Phrases: *to be at (deadly) feud, to have (a person) at feud.* **3.** A state of perpetual hostility between two families, tribes, or individuals, marked by murderous assaults in revenge for some previous insult or injury.

2. Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan* Pt. 1 Ch. 13 (B 1599).

3. The Venerable Bede, *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, in *The Longman's Anthology of British Literature*, Volume 1A, 133.

4. From *The Battle of Maldon* ll. 312-13, in *Bright's Old English Grammar & Reader* (New York, 1971), p. 371:

Faith shall be firmer, hearts all the fiercer,
Courage the keener, the more our might lessens.

(My translation – I think.)