Annotated Beowulf

Each day, one evil dweller in darkness

Florey says that this scop is “a world prophet or divinely sanctioned priest who bestows, by proxy, God’s blessing upon the building and the values it represents” (87). Also, Florey explains that, according to Paul Beekman Taylor, “there are definite links between the erection of Heorot and the beginnings of the world itself.” Additionally, Construction of a building to celebrate the glory of creation “is common to many creation myths.” The construction of the mead-hall could be the beginnings of life itself (86).

where Hrothgar’s men made merry with mead,

Donahue says that “light, music, poetry” are symbols of the mead-hall and its inhabitants (75).

Harp-strings would sound, and the song of the scop

Much argument has been made on the Christianity of Beowulf and its poet. Ultimately, Reynolds believes that Beowulf’s author was pagan and that this illusion to creation was an insertion by a Christian redactor. However, this insertion does help “to reveal the weaknesses of the purely secular view” (30). Donahue summarizes that most critics see a pagan poem that was edited by a Christian who eliminated references to pagan gods and inserted monotheistic and Old Testament passages (57). On the other hand, Garde sees the poem as Christian, saying that “the text itself offers compelling evidence of a contemporary Christian point of view” (328). Furthermore, the reference to Cain (line 97), clearly offers itself as a Biblical source for the conflict of the poem. Garde argues that “A medieval Christian conception of temporal history is clearly indicated in the Grendel story” (329-331). Similarly, with the reference to Cain and the alienation from God that followed his deed, Goldsmith says that “the Christian poet was writing about the human tragedy as he understood it” (72). “a military attendant, follower, or retainer; a soldier” (OED)

would recount the tales told of time past:

“a piece of unenclosed waste ground” (OED)

whence mankind had come, and how the Almighty

“low land covered wholly or partially with shallow water” (OED)

had fashioned the world with its fair fields

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set in wide waters, with sun and moon

“a piece of unenclosed waste ground” (OED)

lifted on high and lighting the lands

“low land covered wholly or partially with shallow water” (OED)

for Earth’s first dwellers, with forests everywhere

Branching and blooming, with life breathing

in all kinds of creatures

So the king’s thanes

gathered in gladness, then crime came calling,

“a military attendant, follower, or retainer; a soldier” (OED)

a horror from hell, hideous Grendel,

“a piece of unenclosed waste ground” (OED)

wrathful rover of borders and moors,

“low land covered wholly or partially with shallow water” (OED)

holder of hollows, haunter of fens.

In arguing that Grendel was a bigfoot, Duncan says that “Grendel had to be placed within a meaningful cultural category,” that made sense to the Anglo-Saxons. Therefore, the poet, as a Christian, “explained Grendel as a descendant of Cain” (96).

as kindred of Cain, thereby requiting

Goldsmithe explains two types of offspring from Cain. First, “The spiritual sons of Cain are all those who ‘build their cities’ in this world, like Hrothgar at Heorot, pinning all their hope on a false good” (75). The other offspring are embodied in Grendel, whose visitation is eventually seen by Hrothgar “as allowed by God because of his own pride in his power and wealth” (74). These giants are “The second class of Cain’s descendants mentioned in Beowulf.” Emerson relates this to the Bible, saying that following the story of Cain, in chapter six of Genesis, is the “apparently disconnected account of the giants who sprang from the union of the ‘sons of God’ with the ‘daughters of men.’” He finally concludes that “these giants are none other than those of Genesis 6, and the reward, or retribution given them was the flood” (888-892).

the slayer of Abel. Many such sprang

In Medieval Times, “the weapon par excellence, but not a very common one, was the sword.” The swords used in this setting may

from the first murderer: monsters and misfits,

whose wars with the Lord earned them exile.

elves and ill-spirits, also those giants

After nightfall he nosed around Heorot,

whose wars with the Lord earned them exile.

saw how swordsmen slept in the hall,
unwary and weary with wine and feasting, have been adorned with rings, which could have been “the rings given by kings in literature;” a sign that a “warrior had been rewarded by his lord” (“Swords” 1) Millspaugh contends that the gathering at the mead-hall is for the warriors to receive “rings from him (Hrothgar) in recognition of their loyal service and heroism” (1).

Donahue explains the visit by Grendel as being motivated by his view of Heorot, which Donahue claims is a place which glorifies God. Earlier in this passage, there is an allusion to creation and the telling of the creation story in the hall. Donahue says that “It was this dream (of creation) that aroused the heathen Grendel to attack Heorot” (76). Florey adds: “Grendel’s initial raid on Heorot is caused by his anger and revulsion that men are celebrating together” (88).

The cursed creature, cruel and remorseless, swiftly slipped in. He seized thirty thanes asleep after supper, shouldered away what trophies he would, and took to his lair pleased with the plunder, proud of his murders. When daylight dawned on the spills of slaughter, the strength of the fiend was readily seen. The feast was followed by fits of weeping, and cries of outrage rose in the morning.

Hrothgar the strong sank on his throne, helpless and hopeless, beholding the carnage, the trail of the terror, a trouble too wrathful, a foe too ferocious, too steadfast in rage, ancient and evil. The evening after he murdered again with no more remorse, so fixed was his will on that wicked feud. Henceforth the fearful were easily found elsewhere, anywhere far from the fiend, bedding in barns, for the brutal hall-thane was truly betokened by terrible signs, and those who escaped stayed safer afar.

So wrath fought alone against rule and right; one routed many; the mead-hall stood empty. Strongest of Spear-Danes, Hrothgar suffered this fell affliction for twelve winters’ time.

Lord argues that Hrothgar’s helplessness is the first stage of a unique narrative pattern that is found in widely disseminated epic or story tradition, which is also found in the Iliad and the Odyssey. This 1st stage is: “A powerful figure is not present, or, for various reasons, is powerless in a situation of danger to his people” ( ).

With this description, the poet forces his audience to view Hrothgar’s people as “totally helpless when set upon by something beyond the ordinary power of man.” This prepares the reader “to appreciate and admire Beowulf as an extraordinary hero accomplishing a truly great action” (Reynolds 30).

Florey explains that the dispersal of the Danes is what seems to cause their despair and affliction. He says: “It is almost as if Grendel senses their emotional attachment to the hall, and it is his ability to disrupt their tranquility, to bring their civilization into the realm of chaos that appears to delight him more than the satiation of his physical appetite” (89).

A constant theme throughout Beowulf, the battle of good vs. evil is explained by Millsapgh: “Hrothgar, who rewards loyalty and keeps peace in his kingdom is simply ‘a good king.’” Grendel, who kills indiscriminately and threatens the social order, is pure evil. This discrepancy is the main source of conflict for the entire poem (1,2).
As his woes became known widely and well,
sad songs were sung by the **sons of men**:
how season on season, with ceaseless strife,
Grendel assailed the Scyldings’ sovereign.

Florey explains that this phrase “emphasizes the universal nature of the
destruction” (89). The Danes’ entire lifestyle and culture is
being destroyed by Grendel. (see note on line 126).

In support of his argument that Grendel was a bigfoot, Duncan argues
that Grendel shares common habits with the bigfoot. One
such habit is isolation (94).

This was a compensation generally paid by the family of the murdered
to the family of the murdered. With this payment, a feud
could be avoided. However, Grendel does not pay wergeld, thereby
supporting the feud and the conflict that are the basis of this story
(Donahue 110).

According to Emerson, “Grendel is constantly referred to as a monster
of darkness. While this characteristic is not exclusively
connected with Cain and his descendents of course, it was attributed to
them in medieval tradition” (882).

No man knows where on the misty moor
the heathen keepers of hell-runes wander.
Works Cited


