

DUE: Monday, Nov. 9th

An Education in the Mead-Hall: *Beowulf's* Lessons for Young Warriors

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Assignment: Read and ANNOTATE

Purpose: To see an example literary analysis/research paper and as a possible supplemental published text to cite in your literary analysis

<http://www.heroicage.org/issues/5/Bruce1.html>

ABSTRACT: This essay explores how *Beowulf* may have indoctrinated the young warriors hearing the tale. The poem prompts the *geoguð* (young warriors) to consider how they would respond in psychologically threatening situations, and it presents as their model Beowulf, who faces each risk bravely and is justly rewarded.

Why do we tell stories? To entertain, certainly, but also to teach. Lessons are encoded within the actions of the tale; the "basic function of the traditional oral epic," John Foley contends in his "*Beowulf* and the Psychohistory of Anglo-Saxon Culture," is the "transmission of culturally useful information" (Foley 133). And, as Peter Clemoes notes, the more specific end of Anglo-Saxon poetry was to pass down both "society's collective wisdom about itself" and "its established perception of both the environment it needed to control and its human resources for doing so"-that is, the poetry taught its audience how they could respond best to the world around them (Clemoes 68). Certainly over the past decades, scholars have assessed *Beowulf*, the Old English epic of the hero and his battles with three monsters, as a teaching tool; that is, they considered that the poem was meant to be didactic, that one of its functions within the community was to pass along knowledge or lessons to its greater Anglo-Saxon audience. While various scholars have discussed the nature of the audience, one specific audience of the poem has not been fully considered: the younger warriors, the *geoguð*. [1] These young men, unproved in battle, would certainly identify with Beowulf, whom they first hear of as a young warrior, a warrior without a great reputation, a warrior who, like them, must prove himself. As the poem develops, the young warriors hear how Beowulf faced the sorts of challenges they would one day face; they could learn from his responses how to face their first battle, how to respond when separated from help, and how to act when confronted by death. Beowulf also taught them that brave warriors who fulfilled their boasts received not only material treasure to enjoy while they lived, but also eternal praise, their only source for immortality in a violent, unyielding society.

I must note at the outset that, in a sense, I am writing about a poem that doesn't exactly exist. That is to say, the argument of this paper depends upon how we understand the oral *Beowulf* - a work we have only represented in the textual *Beowulf*. The oral *Beowulf* was performed at a time removed from the creation of the written work of B.L. Cotton Vitellius A.xv.; how far removed, though, we can never know, nor do we know how different the two narratives of *Beowulf* were. All we know is that at some point, the story of Beowulf was considered important enough to be written down. But why? One reason, I believe, is that *Beowulf* spoke so well to its audience -its complete audience. They wanted to hear it again and again, and thus the story was perpetuated, told and re-told (doubtlessly with variation) until someone wrote it down. And that manuscript offers us the only evidence for what the oral poem may have been.

My argument also assumes that the audience for the oral *Beowulf* included young warriors, the *geoguð*. Such an assumption, that there were young, inexperienced (or less experienced) men in the mead hall hearing heroic exploits is supported by the poem itself. We are told that Hrothgar's retinue included “*geoguð: Þa wæs Hroðgare heresped gyfen, / wiges weorðmynd, þæt him his winemagas / georne hyrdon, oðð þæt seo geogodð geweax, / magodriht micel* [“Then was Hrothgar given success in battle,/ the glory of war, so that his beloved kinsmen/ willingly followed him, until the band/ of young warriors grew,/ a great company”] (lines 64- 67a).[2] Grendel drove away both young and old from Heorot: (*ac se) æglæca ehtende wæs, / deorc deapscua, duguþe ond geogope* [“but the demon,/ the dark death-shadow,/ was pursuing the tried and untried retainers”] (lines 159-160). Wealhtheow shares the mead-cup with the young and the old in Heorot: *Ymbeode þa ides Helminga / duguþe ond geogope dæl ghwylcne, / sincfate sealde* [“The woman of the Helmings/ then went around to veterans and young warriors,/ passing the precious cup”] (lines 620-622a). Hrothgar's sons Hrethric and Hrothmund are counted among the *geoguð*: *Hwearf þa bi bence þær hyre byre wæron / Hreðric ond Hroðmund, ond hæleþa bearn, / giogodð ætgædere* [“(Wealhtheow) turned then to the bench where their sons were,/ Hrethric and Hrothmund, and the children of warriors,/ the young men together”] (lines 1188-1190a). And, having disposed of Grendel and his mother, Beowulf is proud to have made Heorot safe for all the warriors: *Ic hit þe þonne gehate, þæt þu on Heorote most / sorhleas swefan mid þinra secga gedryht, / ond þegna gehwylc þinra leoda, / duguðe ond iogope* [“I had promised it to you, that in Heorot/ you would be able to sleep without cares with your troop of warriors,/ and so might each of your people,/ the old warriors and the young”] (lines 1671-1674a). We can easily suppose that the mead-hall audience of the oral *Beowulf* paralleled the “audience” found in Heorot; the audience hearing the poem in Anglo-Saxon England would have included not just the tried retainers but the uninitiated young men, those *geoguð* who feared the unknown just as much as the *geoguð* in *Beowulf* feared Grendel. Thus, with this fuller understanding of the youthful element in the audience of the oral *Beowulf*, we may now consider what lessons the poem taught them.

Actually, the appraisal of *Beowulf* as a teaching device is not new. Levin L. Schücking proposed as early as 1929 that the poem was used to teach princes; the lessons within *Beowulf*, Schücking argues, are meant to display “the kingship ideal . . . [as] a mixture of Germanic-heroic and Stoic-Christian ideas” ([Schücking](#) 36). Karl Brunner, writing in 1954, augmented Schücking's belief that *Beowulf* was designed as a *Fürstenspiegel*, or “mirror of a prince,” by focusing on the Christian elements; he subsequently decided that the poem was part of a movement of “religious and didactic literature” ([Brunner](#) 3). G. N. Garmonsway stated in his 1965 essay “Anglo-Saxon Heroic Attitudes” that:

taken as a whole, the story with its episodes and digressions does form a kind of eighth-century 'Mirror for Magistrates' . . . wherein those in authority might have seen pictured their obligations and responsibilities . . . and learned some useful lessons about current moral sanctions governing behavior in general, and heroic conduct in particular ([Garmonsway](#) 139).

These approaches all consider that the lessons of *Beowulf* applied only to the rulers, the elite; other scholars, though, see the poem from a different perspective and argue that *Beowulf* held lessons for the entire community. Dorothy Whitelock conceived of a much broader audience, one not limited to princes and nobles, an audience that

"would doubtless consist both of veterans and of young men" ([Whitelock](#) 89). Marjorie Daunt, emphasizing the presence of such young, untested warriors, discussed in her "Minor Realism and Contrast in *Beowulf*" how the details within the poem made it more realistic and appealing to them. John Foley has gone a bit deeper, arguing that *Beowulf* illustrated, for all the community, the "history of human psychological development," and thereby "actively counseled all members at all levels of social and psychological growth . . . [and reinforced] the human maturation process" ([Foley](#) 135). Though I do not completely agree with Foley's ultimately Jungian interpretation of *Beowulf* (one weakness of his argument about the development of the ego is that it stops with the Grendel fight; he doesn't apply his paradigm to the entire poem), I do agree that the poem spoke to its audience, especially the younger members, at a psychological level. That is, the poem allowed the young Anglo-Saxon warriors hearing the narrative to confront unfamiliar and therefore potentially frightening situations—combat, isolation, and death—in a non-threatening manner; the poem also provided an example, the hero Beowulf, from whom the inexperienced warriors could learn how to respond in these challenging situations.

Such an approach may seem to emphasize just the three great battles in the poem. Certainly for most people the battles with Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon stand out as the most memorable moments, but more than the brief, physically violent scenes should be considered. The framework for each battle—the scenes before and after—plays an important role. Before each battle, Beowulf states what he will do; he makes his boast of victory even as he acknowledges the dangers he must face. Then, once each battle is over, Beowulf receives great rewards. This consistent framework serves to remind the young warriors of the entire process, that those who recognize danger yet do not shy from it will be rewarded. The framework for each particular battle will be made clearer as each is discussed.

The battle with Grendel begins, in a sense, with Beowulf's first words to Hrothgar. He comes, as he says, to help Hrothgar with this "*Grendles þing*," this "Grendel business" (409). He has heard of Grendel and his nightly visits, how no one dares to sleep in Hrothgar's great mead-hall Heorot because of the beast's twelve-year rampage. Beowulf admits that he is still counted among the *geoguð* of Hygelac— *Ic eom Higelaces / mæg ond magoðegn; hæbbe ic mærdða fela / ongunnen on geogobe* ["I am Higelac's kinsman and young retainer;/ I have undertaken many famous deeds in my youth"] (lines 407b-409a). He readily and openly acknowledges the power of his foe even as he defends his own credibility as a warrior; after asserting that he has killed many giants before, he boasts that:

*" ac ic mid grape sceal
 fon wið feonde ond ymb feorh sacan,
 lað wið laþum; ðær gelyfan sceal
 Dryhtnes dome se þe hine deað nimeð."* (lines 438b-441)
 ["I with my hands shall seize/ the fiend and contend for his life,/ the hateful against the hostile; there the one whom death carries off/ must trust in God's judgment."]

In spite of the danger involved in fighting Grendel, Beowulf openly declares his intention to destroy this powerful enemy. He must be very forward with his boasting because his reputation as a warrior is not well-known; Hrothgar knows him because of his father and because of the reports of his great strength (Beowulf is said to have the strength

of thirty men), but not because of his reputation as a warrior. Nevertheless, Hrothgar, looking for any solution to his Grendel problem, gladly welcomes Beowulf. Unferth, Hrothgar's *pyle* or spokesman, however, is not so gracious; he openly attacks Beowulf's reputation, accusing him of losing a youthful contest to a certain Breca. Though Beowulf refutes Unferth's slanderous remarks, the *geoguð* hearing the story do learn that even Beowulf once had no reputation as a warrior; at this point he appears just as untried as they are, and they more easily associate themselves with him.

We can easily imagine the young warriors listening even more intently as the battle with Grendel becomes imminent. They hear, just before Grendel descends upon Heorot, Beowulf again boast:

*"Ic þæt hogode, þa ic on holm gestah,
 sæbat gesæt mid minra secga gedriht,
 þæt ic anunga eowra leoda
 willan geworhte, oþðe on wæl crunge
 feondgrapum fæst. Ic gefremman sceal
 eorlic ellen, oþðe endedæg
 on þisse meoduhealle minne gebidan!"* (lines 632-638)

["I expected, when I set out in the sea,/ sat down in the sea-boat with my troop of warriors,/ that I might be able to perform for your people a good deed,/ or I might die in battle in a firm fiend-grip./ I will accomplish heroic deeds of valor,/ or I will abide my death-day in this mead-hall!"]

Beowulf's proud assertion is the response of a true warrior, one who will win or die trying; he is the sort of hero the *geoguð* are supposed to emulate. And Beowulf does fulfill this boast; his comrades, desiring to help but unable, watch him mortally wound Grendel. The next morning, after learning that Grendel's reign of terror has been ended, a *scop* (a court poet) in Hrothgar's retinue crafts a poem celebrating Beowulf's victory:

*"Hwilum cyninges þegn,
 guma gilphlæden, gidda gemyndig,
 se ðe ealfela ealdgesegena
 worn gemunde, word oþer fand
 soðe gebunden; secg eft ongan
 sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian,
 ond on sped wrecan spel gerade" . . .* (lines 867b-873)

[At a certain time the thane of the king,/ the warrior covered with glory,/ the one mindful of songs,/ he who remembered completely very many old traditions,/ found word upon word truly joined;/ the warrior began after to recite with skill Beowulf's journey,/ and to utter successfully a skillful tale.]

In his song, the *scop* compares Beowulf to the celebrated hero Sigemund, reinforcing the notion that with this one deed of defeating Grendel, Beowulf has earned a place for himself among the "immortal" heroes. Then later that same day, at a feast of celebration, Hrothgar gives Beowulf treasures of armor, helmet, horses, and a dazzling saddle; Hrothgar's wife Wealhtheow bestows upon the hero a magnificent necklace. Even his former critic Unferth can say nothing against him; he "*wæs swigra secg . . . on gylpspræce guðgeweorca*" ["was a more silent man in boasting of his war-like deeds"] (980-981). Beowulf has received both a material reward that will benefit him only as long

as he lives and a poetic memorial that will live long after he himself has died. He has also proven himself before not just his peers but also those who seem to have the right-and the authority-to doubt him. Beowulf has moved that much closer to gaining immortality; the *geoguð*, listening in the dark by the fire, learn the rewards of valorous deeds.

After the evening of celebration, though, terror is renewed in Heorot by the appearance of Grendel's mother who comes seeking vengeance for the death of her son. She kills one of Hrothgar's men and sets up the occasion for Beowulf to battle another, ultimately more challenging foe. His encounter with Grendel's mother works to advance the development of Beowulf's character, for the hero is given the opportunity to show his loyalty to Hrothgar, as a proper warrior should show loyalty to his benefactor. Yet the *geoguð* hearing the story might have reacted to more than the artistic quality of Beowulf's encounter with Grendel's mother. The young warriors surely anticipated that there would be times when they would face foes alone; such a prospect would not have been inviting. From their perspective, Beowulf, like them, still needs to prove that he is an independent, truly self-reliant warrior; when he fought Grendel, he did have friends all about him, friends who wanted to help him in the battle, though they were unable. So with this new challenge, Beowulf again serves as an example to these young warriors. To prove his ability to act independently and thus merit his growing status as a warrior, Beowulf elects to descend, alone, into the mere to meet Grendel's mother. He recognizes the danger in the act but chooses to confront it, no matter where he has to venture:

*"Aris, rices weard, uton hraþe feran,
Grendles magan gang sceawigan.*

*Ic hit þe gehate: no he on helm losað,
ne on foldan fæþm, ne on fyrgeholt,*

ne on gyfenes grund, ga þær he wille!" (lines 1390-1394)

["Arise, guardian of the kingdom,/ let us quickly go examine the track of Grendel's kinsman./ I promise it to you: not at all will he escape into cover,/ nor into the earth's embrace, nor into the mountain-wood,/ nor into the bottom of the sea-he may go where he wishes!"]

Just before entering the dark mere, Beowulf boasts once again that he will be victorious or die: *"Ic me mid Hruntinge / dom gewyrce, oþðe mec deað nimeð!"* ["I will win glory for myself with [this sword] Hrunting, or death will seize me!"] (lines 1490a-1491). So far the frame for this battle has matched that of the fight with Grendel; Beowulf has recognized the danger he faces but approaches it willingly, confidently.

The actual battle with Grendel's mother proves difficult to Beowulf; only narrowly does he escape death. Ultimately he does kill her and takes the head of Grendel back to Hrothgar as a trophy to prove his victory. As before, Hrothgar rewards Beowulf with treasure; we can easily imagine that the *scop* adds more lines of praise to the growing song of Beowulf. From the actions of Beowulf, the *geoguð* learn that even when isolated and facing great danger alone, a warrior must always be willing to meet the challenge bravely. They should emulate Beowulf and see such situations not as dangers but as opportunities to show their loyalty and bravery and thereby win greater praise.

After this battle, having proven himself not once but twice, Beowulf returns proudly to his lord Hygelac. He has shown himself to be a fearless and self-reliant warrior-characteristics that, as the young warriors in the audience soon hear, serve him

well in the wars of his later life. Thus far the *geoguð* have heard how a fellow warrior won his name and began his career. But another question remains, one that the young warriors are already intimately familiar with by the nature of their martial society. That is, how will they face death? When they enter a battle that they feel will be their last, how will they respond? Here again, Beowulf stands before them as a role model.

Beowulf's final battle comes more than fifty years after the confrontations with Grendel and his mother. He is now an old man about to face his greatest challenge, the dragon that is devastating his land. The dragon Beowulf fights, though, represents something more than a mere beast; it is death, which comes for every warrior. Nor should we be surprised that the poem moves toward such an end, for, as J. R. R. Tolkien emphasized in his landmark 1936 essay "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," "Disaster is foreboded. Defeat is the theme. Triumph over the foes of man's precarious fortress is over, and we approach slowly and reluctantly the inevitable victory of death" (Tolkien 28). Beowulf even seems to recognize that this battle will be his last, as his lengthy ruminations on death before the fight suggest that he knows chaos must triumph, that his death is imminent. As well, he emphasizes the great danger awaiting him in this battle more than he did before the earlier fights, and his initial boast seems much more subdued:

*"Nolde ic sweord beran
wæpen to wyrme, gif ic wiste hu
wið ðam aglæcean elles meahte
gylpe wiðgripan, swa ic gio wið Grendle dyde;
ac ic ðær heaðufyres hates wene,
oreðes ond attres; forðon ic me on hafu
bord ond byrnan*

*. Ic eom on mode from,
þæt ic wið þone guðflogan gylp ofersitte.*" (lines 2518b-2524a; 2527b-2528) ["I would not carry a sword, a weapon against the dragon,/ if I knew how else to fulfill my boast against the monster,/ to grapple with the might of my strength,/ as I earlier did against Grendel; but there I expect the heat of deadly fire,/ breath and poison; therefore I will have on me shield and armor./[. . .] I am bold in spirit, so that I will abstain from boasting against the war-flier."]

However, his last words to his men before the battle are a return to his earlier nature, a return to the Beowulf who refuses to flee danger but instead confronts it, no matter how threatening: "*Ic mid elne sceall / gold gegangan, oððe guð nimeð, / feorhbealu frecne frean eowerne!*" ["I with my strength shall obtain gold,/ or this battle, a terrible deadly evil,/ will take your lord!"] (lines 2535b- 2537). As he has in every other confrontation, he will face this great danger, this dragon of death, bravely. He takes with him twelve men, whom he instructs not to interfere, for he knows that this combat must be met alone. Then we, just as the *geoguð* did long ago, watch him march by himself against the dragon. Though he fights his best, Beowulf is hopelessly outmatched; he is burned, bitten, and poisoned. Only with the help of Wiglaf, a young warrior not unlike the ones hearing the tale, does Beowulf slay the dragon.

Wiglaf, though, does more than help Beowulf overcome the dragon; he also stands for the *geoguð* as another heroic model, one perhaps more attractive as the poem moves to

its close. James Earl in 'Thinking About Beowulf' has noted that the hero's death ruins the audience's identification with him; while we do find much to admire in the great heroes like Achilles, Oedipus, Hamlet, or even Beowulf, ultimately we do not "want to shoulder their agonies outside the text" (Earl 143). Though we do enjoy "the temporary narcissistic fantasies that come into play in art," just as the *geoguð* did centuries earlier, at some point we terminate those fantasies—in the end we don't wish to become those characters because in the end those characters suffer and (often) die (Earl 146). Thus we in the audience may find our perspectives shifting, "our identification chang[ing] as the plot develops toward its inevitable end" (Earl 148); and for the *geoguð* listening in the mead-hall, that shift means identifying with the surviving Wiglaf instead of the dying Beowulf. Wiglaf is the new model of the faithful retainer, and the lambasting he gives to the faithless retainers further emphasizes for the young audience the lesson they are to take from their new counterpart. Because of their failure to support their lord, Wiglaf states, the cowardly retainers have shamed themselves forever:

*"Nu sceal sincþego ond swyrdgifu,
eall eðelwyn eowrum cynne,
lufen alicgean; londrihtes mot
þære mægburge monna æghwylc
idel hweorfan, syððan æðelingas
feorran gefricgean fleam eowerne,
domleasan dæd. Deað bið sella
eorla gehwylcum þonne edwitlif!"* (lines 2884-2891)

["Now shall end the receiving of treasure and the giving of swords,/ the enjoyment of your family homes;/ each one of your kin must go deprived of land-rights,/ once the nobles far and wide hear of your flight,/ your deed without glory./ Death is better to any earl than a life of disgrace!"]

This bold statement reinforcing the heroic code would certainly have echoed in the minds of the young warriors as much as it echoes throughout the poem; Beowulf made similar statements about the importance of bravery and fidelity earlier in the poem, and now the "new" hero, the still-young Wiglaf, prompts the audience to remember that such heroic qualities are indeed what they should seek to have.

Still, the diminished identification with Beowulf does not mean that the *geoguð* would not have appreciated the hero's last moments nor learned from his example. Though he lies near death, Beowulf can take some pleasure in his accomplishment. For one, he is able to see the gold of the dragon's hoard before he dies and know that once again he has won material wealth. But more than that, Beowulf knows that his fame will now assuredly live forever; not only will his story be told for generations, but people will know simply by looking at his burial mound that he was a great warrior. He himself gives instructions for his tomb:

*"Hatað heaðomære hlæw gewyrcean
beorhtne æfter bæle æt brimes nosan;
se scel to gemyndum minum leodum
heah hlifan on Hronesnæsse,
ðæt hit sæliðend syððan hatan
Biowulfes biorh, ða ðe brentingas
ofer floda genipu feorran drifað."* (lines 2802-2808)

["Command the ones renowned in battle to make at the water's edge a splendid barrow after the funeral pyre; it shall stand high at Hronesnsse as a memory to my people, so that sea-farers, those who drive ships far over the flood's mists, afterwards will call it Beowulf's barrow."]

As well, Beowulf can find some satisfaction in knowing that, though death won, he cheated death of earning any glory. No one can truly hope to defeat death; though this dragon of chaos did perish as it delivered the death blow to Beowulf, another dragon will rise and come for Wiglaf, and the Geats, and even the *geoguð* hearing the tale. Knowing this inevitability, the best any warrior can do is respond as Beowulf did; those who fight bravely can cheat death of its glory and take the praise for themselves. Through his actions, Beowulf achieved a form of immortality; what more could a Germanic warrior hope for?

Thus the young warriors hearing the song of Beowulf learned many lessons. They learned to be ever vigilant, unlike Hondscioh, Grendel's last victim; they learned never to turn from their lord, as the unfaithful retainers did in Beowulf's last battle. But more than that, they learned that those who are willing to enter battle, who are self-reliant, and who are fearless even in the face of death ultimately win great rewards. They will receive material treasure to last them their physical lives and eternal praise that will keep their names and reputations alive for generations to come. As Beowulf, himself *lofgeornost* or "most eager for praise" (3182), explained before battling Grendel's mother,

*"Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan
worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
domes þær deaþe; æt bið drihtguman
unlifgendum æfter selest."* (lines 1386-1389)

["Every one of us shall experience the end of worldly life;/ may he who is able win glory before death;/ that is afterwards the best for an unliving warrior."]

Truly Beowulf stood before the *geoguð* as the epitome of the Germanic warrior, a hero the *geoguð* would want to emulate-even if they chose to focus on Wiglaf at the poem's end, the two heroes espoused the same heroic principles. And their society, so often filled with chaos, needed these young warriors to adopt such an attitude so that they could one day join the struggle to maintain some sense of order.

From the elder warriors the *geoguð* could learn how to handle weapons, how to defend themselves, how to fight. And perhaps the elder warriors would offer encouragement, telling the younger ones how they fared in their first battles, how they faced their challenges. But to hear of the first and last battles of Beowulf, whom they have recognized as one like them, would certainly fill them with inspiration and motivate them to continue the traditions of their Germanic heritage, the tradition of performing brave deeds no matter the adversity. And perhaps therein lies one reason for the poem's enduring popularity, both within the Anglo-Saxon period and even unto our day, and especially among young people, for with every generation the *geoguð* is replenished; with every generation we have young people who seek guidance and examples as they confront life's inner challenges.